

April 14, 2024
The Third Sunday in Easter
St. Stephen's, Catlett; St. Andrew's, Ada
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Acts 3:12-19
Psalm 4
1 John 3:1-7
Luke 24:36b-48

I wonder if it strikes anyone else as odd that all of our readings on this Third Sunday in Easter talk about sin, repentance, and forgiveness. I think they're kind of odd topics for a season as joyous as Easter. And yet Peter, John, and Luke are all saying the same thing: Jesus died and rose again so that our sin would be forgiven. Jesus Himself tells us that "repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations" (Luke 24:48). So I guess we'd better take a moment and talk about sin today, and we might as well tackle the hardest statement first: John tells us in his first letter that "No one who abides in Jesus Christ sins; no one who sins has either seen Him or known Him" (1 John 3:6). One little sin and we no longer live in Christ? But John says earlier in the same letter that "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8). It sounds like if we sin, we're in trouble, and if we say we don't sin, we're in trouble. The way out is to recognize a big difference between English and Greek. In English, we can say either that I sin or that I am sinning. The first indicates an occasional action, while the second suggests repeated or habitual action. Greek has no such distinction, so in translating, we have to guess that John was thinking of the habitual, sense of sin – in English we call it the present imperfect – the idea of repeating the pattern of sin over and over again with no hint of stopping.

But even with that distinction, we're stuck. Whether we sin once or sin habitually, we still find ourselves in a state of sin, and so we have the gift and power of repentance. We've seen before that repentance means changing direction, changing course. If we're headed toward a roadblock, we take a detour. If we're in a kayak headed toward Class V rapids, we change course pretty fast. Repentance is the recognition of sinful behavior against God and the turning of oneself back toward God.

It's like we're dancing a complicated tango with God: we move in step, we grow close and cling, and then we spin away. Our dance with God involves periods of divine embrace and periods of human, sometimes sinful separation. This dance is also governed by the principal that one leads and the other follows. I know that in my own dance with God, I often forget that my eternal role is to follow, not lead. Or sometimes I get so caught up in the dance itself that I forget I have a Partner, and I spin myself right into another – sinful – world.

If I am still within God's reach, God will gently bring me back to where I belong; if I have drifted too far, something more drastic to bring me back will be required to get my attention and urge me to change direction and return to my Heavenly Partner. And whether it's God the Creator, God the Redeemer, or God the Sanctifier and Sustainer, it is the one God Who opens my mind to the Scriptures, reminds me of the eternal truths, and invites me back into the sacred dance. Ultimately, however, I am the only one who can choose to turn back from the wrong path I have taken; like the Prodigal Son, I have to say, "I will arise and go to my Father" (Luke 15:18). That is the heart of repentance that leads to the forgiveness of sin, whether occasional or habitual.

Is it odd that we speak of sin and repentance during the great fifty days of Easter? Hardly. Forgiveness of sin is the essence of the Christian Gospel and the message we are commanded by the Risen Lord to proclaim. Sometimes it's as simple as remembering that in this dance, we do not lead. Ever.