

Discerning What Is Best

Romans 6: 1-4, 11-14

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life...In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Luke 9:28-36

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him.

As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.) While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.

MESSAGE:

Paul begins his letter to the church at Philippi with a beautiful prayer. He says, "I pray that your love will abound in knowledge and depth of insight so that you will be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."

So what does Paul mean in his prayer? What is the "fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ?" It's the confidence we have that God has clothed us in Jesus' righteousness and has forgiven all our sins. What is the "day of Christ?" It's the time when Jesus returns and we all face the final judgement.

And what exactly is Paul talking about when he uses the word “love”? There are different kinds of love. There’s a kind of love we feel for our mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers and children. We call it family love. There’s the powerful, magnetic love that draws men and women together and makes them one flesh. Then there’s the deep affection we can feel for a dear friend. And finally, there’s the love that consists of helping others—the love that St. John speaks of when he urges us to, “love not in word and tongue, but in truth and action.” There’s a word for that kind of love: we call it “charity”—and it doesn’t only mean giving alms to the poor, it means helping other people when they need help—putting their needs ahead of our own needs. Self-sacrificing love—the kind of love Jesus showed for us when He went to the cross. And this is the kind of love he was referring to when he instructed his disciples to “love one another as I have loved you”—self-sacrificing love, putting other people first. And it’s that kind of love Paul that said leads to knowledge and depth of insight. So how does it work?

Well, as we focus more on the needs of others and less on our own needs—like Jesus did, we become more like him. And as we become more like Jesus we grow in spiritual insight and discernment. We become better able to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong, the true and the false, the light and the darkness. We grow in spiritual discernment which helps us “...remain pure and blameless until the day of Christ, and be filled with his righteousness.”

And why is it important that we remain pure and blameless? Two reasons. First, so that we can draw others to the kingdom of God through our example. Second, because one day we will stand before Christ to give an account of ourselves. *2nd Corinthians 5:10*: “for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

So it’s vitally important to us to practice love for our neighbor so that we can grow in spiritual knowledge and insight because it can be more difficult to distinguish between good and evil than you might think. If we could clearly see evil for what it is, we wouldn’t be attracted to it—in fact we would be repulsed by it.

But evil is not always that easy to discern. C.S. Lewis wrote that more evil enters the world through the polite conversation of gentlemen than through malicious design. The devil’s ability to disguise himself as an angel of light to us is one of his most powerful—and effective—tricks. He knows that if he showed us evil in its plain, unvarnished form, we would recoil from it in horror. So instead, he shows us evil in drag—all dressed up like something it isn’t—a sugar-coated poison pill which tastes delicious but makes us sick later. I can’t think of a better example of this than one of the most successful movies Hollywood has ever produced.—a movie called “Titanic.”

“Titanic” was released in 1997 and was the most expensive film ever made, incurring over two hundred million dollars in production costs. It also became the second

highest grossing film of all time, earning almost 2.2 billion dollars. Everybody said that the movie was beautiful. Its lead actors were young and beautiful. The set and costumes were beautiful. The musical score was beautiful. The story had all the right ingredients of a great love story: jealousy, cowardice, heroism, death and a happy ending. Film critics loved it and it was nominated for eleven academy awards—winning the award for best picture of the year. It was a huge popular success—tens of millions of people flocked to see it—many of them to see it again, and even again.

So what's the problem with "Titanic?" The problem is that if you strip the movie down to its basic plot what you have is a young girl in her late teens who is engaged—against her will—to a man she detests but is nonetheless sleeping with. She meets and falls in love with another young man who she's attracted to and sleeps with him as well (bear in mind, this all happens in two days.) The ship sinks, he drowns, she survives and at the end of her life she proclaims that her Titanic experience set her free.

Referring to her young paramour, she says, "He saved me in every way a person can be saved." Then she dies and is reunited with her young bedmate who has now dried out and dwells in Titanic heaven. That's the plot and those are the characters and here's the message: First, even if a member of the opposite sex is hateful and you detest him, it's ok to sleep with him if you're engaged. In fact, it makes you kind of a martyr. Second, if a member of the opposite sex is attractive to you and you feel passionately drawn to him, it's ok to sleep with him. So it's ok to have sex with people you hate and it's ok to have sex with people you love, and if you follow your hormones you will be liberated for life, saved in every way you can be saved, and go to heaven when you die.

My friends, even in my day any teenage boy who could convince a girl of these three things would have an excellent chance of—shall we say—prevailing in her affections. But he doesn't even have to persuade her himself—he can just take her to see "Titanic" and let the movie do the work. See how moral depravity and spiritual blasphemy can be attractively decked out and sold under the alluring title of "romance?" And make no mistake, to kids whose hormones are in an uproar to begin with, this message sells like hotcakes.

And we're not just talking about "sowing your wild oats" or "teenage misadventures"—we're talking about a social catastrophe. We're talking about seven out of ten babies born to teenage girls being born out of wedlock, leaving most of the mothers to raise the child alone—while most of the rest are simply aborted. We're talking about 25% of sexually active teenagers with venereal disease and fifty-six million Americans with incurable STD's. We're talking about more than 50% of the marriages in our country ending in divorce.

And we're not just talking about numbers: we're talking about emotional, physical and spiritual suffering on a massive scale that can scar a person for life. This is the harvest

of human misery which is the fruit of so-called “sexual liberation.” We are entering pornotopia in this country with the entertainment industry cheering us on—all the while calling what they do “art” and invoking their first amendment rights to do it. And, of course, calling anyone who objects a “prude” and “out of touch” and screaming “censorship.”

So what do we do? How do we navigate through this swamp of decadence? How do we discern what is best and remain pure and blameless instead of sinking like the Titanic. Maybe there’s an answer for us in today’s gospel for Transfiguration Sunday. Consider the situation that Peter, James and John find themselves in. Jesus has taken them up to the top of a mountain where strange things start to happen. His clothes turn white and begin to flash like lightning. Moses and Elijah appear and are talking with Jesus. A mysterious cloud descends and envelopes them all. No wonder they were bewildered—the text says, “Peter didn’t know what he was saying.” They begin to doubt their own senses and powers of reason. Then the voice of God comes from within the cloud, saying: ***“this is my son whom I have chosen: listen to him!”*** Then the cloud evaporates, the two prophets disappear and they were left alone with Jesus.

Moses, the great lawgiver, is gone. Elijah the great prophet is gone. There is only Jesus. For them—and for us.

We don’t need the wisdom of the Greeks or any man-made philosophy. We have Jesus. We don’t need decision matrices or five-step plans to attain holiness. We have Jesus. And we sure don’t need the wisdom of Hollywood—that mishmash of pornography, narcissism, profanity and religious blasphemy that passes for art. We have Jesus who personifies love in action. We not only have him as the object of our faith but as the inspiration and the fountainhead of our love. So read him, study him, pray to him, worship him, receive him in word and sacrament—invite him into every pore of your being, and he will fill you with his righteousness and give you spiritual discernment which will help you remain pure and blameless until the day he takes you to live with him forever.

Amen.