

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A, February 12, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Speaking of Sin”
Sirach 15:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37

from time to time I get asked why Episcopal preachers don't talk much about sin; usually it is asked by church visitors or by members who grew up in a different denomination; and from their perspective, I'm presuming, sin should be a more frequent sermon topic; that is a good question, because it touches upon deep theological understandings and upon a recognition that the Episcopal Church does look at certain issues differently than other denominations; well, since both our readings from Sirach and from Matthew today focus upon sin, so will I; and I will also address why sin is not as frequent a sermon topic in our church as some might expect

parenthetically, if the book of Sirach is not familiar to you, it may be because it is from a section of the Bible called the Apocrypha; these are books that were written between the time of the canonical--official--books of the Old Testament and the time of the New Testament, so a more descriptive way to refer to them is the 'Intertestamental books;' readings from them appear in our lectionary from time to time, but not frequently

notice how Sirach repeats over and over again that we have important choices before us: a choice to act faithfully, or not; a choice to follow God's commandments, or not; a choice to accept life, or not; and this is not a one-time choice he's referring to, but a series of choices, ones that we make each day of our lives, throughout our lives; this is not an idea unique to Sirach; throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, we repeatedly find this same understanding that individuals have the personal responsibility, and the necessity, to choose good over evil

this responsibility is assumed also in our reading from Matthew; Jesus restates several of the Ten Commandments, but interprets them in far wider terms; not just murder, but anger is a breach of God's law; not just adultery, but lust is a breach of God's law; and not just swearing falsely, but swearing at all is a breach of God's law; Jesus expects that we have the ability within us to follow these stricter guidelines, and that we can and should do whatever it takes to avoid sinning

the Episcopal Church agrees with this idea that we can choose rightly if--and that is a big if--if, we allow God to help us to choose rightly; we cannot do it completely by ourselves, but if we do allow God's Holy Spirit to inform us and to guide us in our actions, then we've got a good chance of doing what's right most of the time--not one of us will ever get it right all of the time; that's why we put so much emphasis in our church on the lifelong learning process and on always striving to grow in our relationship with God; that's how we focus our teaching and preaching; we focus on the positive that we're aiming for--spiritual growth and an ever-deepening relationship with God, with Christ, and with the Holy Spirit--more than upon the negative, the act of falling short of that aim--sinning; now you may recognize that this takes a pretty optimistic view of human nature, and it is one that is not necessarily shared by other churches

the Roman Catholic Church has a very long tradition of taking a less optimistic view of human nature in light of its concept of 'original sin;' this term does not appear in the Bible, nor anywhere in our *Book of Common Prayer*; it is an idea developed by St Augustine of Hippo back in the 5th century that comes primarily from the story of the Fall of humankind in Genesis; the idea is that all humans have inherited original sin from what Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden, so there is just no getting away from sin; without even considering the individual sins that you or I may have committed, there is no getting away from this inherited sinfulness that infects all of humankind

certain Protestant churches also have a long tradition of taking a less optimistic view of human nature from the influence of John Calvin; also drawing from the story of the Fall in Genesis, Calvin developed the concept of the 'total depravity' of humankind; this term also does not appear in the Bible, nor anywhere in our *Book of Common Prayer*; its idea is that human nature is so corrupted by sin that we are unable to choose good over evil, even that we are unable to choose God

now my point is not that either the Roman Catholic Church or churches that follow Calvin's Protestant views are wrong, but just that their views both differ widely from the way we look at sin in the Episcopal Church; both of their views lead them to emphasize sin and to preach about human sinfulness more than we do; and also, we don't read the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden as our psychology textbook any more than we read the Genesis Creation story as our science textbook; in our Catechism (*Book of Common Prayer* p 845), which is the succinct summary of how Episcopalians interpret the Bible message as a whole, we affirm from that same Genesis story that we are "made in the image of God" and that "we

are free to make choices”

as Episcopalians we take sin seriously; we include a general confession in almost every one of our worship services; and we offer, as one of our seven sacraments, the Reconciliation of a Penitent--which is private confession to a priest for anyone who feels that the Confession and Absolution in our regular worship is not enough for them (*Book of Common Prayer* p 447); few people take advantage of this, but it is available if you want it or need it

we take sin seriously, but we do not define ourselves, as Episcopalian Christians, primarily by our sinfulness; we define ourselves as being children of God; the driving force for us is not sin, nor the guilt or fear of sin; the defining force for us is God’s love, and our ability to respond to that love; we strive to build our lives of faith upon living out a lifelong pilgrimage, in which we learn and grow in our knowledge and love of God; that doesn’t prevent us from sinning, but it keeps us on the right path for making better choices; that’s what we believe; that’s what we teach; that’s what we preach; that’s what we experience together, following Christ; and that’s how we define our relationship to God