

March 17, 2024
Text: John 8:42-59

Fifth Sunday in Lent

During Lent, as we move toward the cross, we are called by God's word to see the seriousness of the situation we are in, and our need for our Lord Jesus to save us. We see that our battle isn't against flesh and blood, but as Scripture says, "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

We see Christ resisting Satan's temptations in the wilderness for us. We see Him drive demons out of many. We see Him falsely accused of being an instrument of the prince of demons. And we see how, in all our testing, how we must rely on Him to preserve us, lest we fall.

This Sunday, the last before we enter into Holy Week itself, we see how the most serious danger to our salvation comes, not from outside us, but from within us. Yet we need not be afraid, because as we also see, the one who comes to save us is no mere man, but the great I AM Himself.

This threat comes as a temptation, one that has plagued humanity from the very beginning. It's the idea that we are, in our heart of hearts, neutral, able to make impartial, rational decisions when it comes to everything. Maybe for some things – the clothing we pick out, our schedule for the day, what we'll have for lunch – we are a bit more rational, those even in these things we're often influenced by our emotion, our passions, rather than just pure reason.

But when it comes to good and evil, right and wrong, we by ourselves are unable to freely choose and follow the right. Go back to the Garden. Even before Adam and Eve were corrupted by sin, what was it that lured them away? It was the serpent's offer that they could be like God, knowing good and evil. The devil was implying that they couldn't rely on God for that and trust His word on what was right or wrong. No, they needed to eat the fruit so that they could decide for themselves. And once they had taken that bite, every one of their descendants – you, me, every single person in history – had our reason and senses corrupted by sin, poisoned against God and His truth.

This might seem like a rather bold, maybe even extreme claim to make, that no one is able to choose or do truly good or right things apart from God, but consider what takes place in our Gospel lesson. If there was anyone who should have been able to choose the right, it would have been the Jews in Jesus' day.

Consider first that they had the Old Testament, containing all the prophecies pointing to Jesus. They had from the prophet Micah that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, which is where Jesus was born. They had the promise given to David that one of his descendants would be the Messiah, and the records in the temple would have shown this to be true for Jesus. They had the words spoken through Isaiah that the Messiah would open the eyes of the blind – something which no prophet ever did, but which Jesus did on multiple occasions. And these are just a few of the many Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in Jesus.

In addition to the Scriptures, the Jews had also observed the great signs and miracles worked by Jesus: countless healings, demons driven out, thousands miraculously fed. Early on, many of the Jews did recognize this as proof of Jesus' divine origin.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came to believe in Jesus, met with Jesus at night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." At that point, Nicodemus isn't making the full confession of who Jesus is, but he and his fellow Pharisees are admitting that Jesus clearly is from God.

So with both the clear word of God pointing to Jesus and God's power visibly working through Jesus, why don't the Jews in our reading come to the clear, rational conclusion that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God? What's holding them back? Jesus says to them, "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word."

They cannot bear to hear Jesus' word. More literally, it could be translated that they are unable to hear His word. It's not a matter of choice, of the mind to make a decision. It's an issue of inability, of a heart that not only doesn't want the word, but that doesn't have the capacity to hear and believe it.

There are two things that play into this. The first is that, because of the corruption of sin that every human has inherited from Adam, all people are born without the ability to choose the things of God or believe in Him.

Consider these words from 1 Corinthians 2: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." The natural person – meaning someone as he is by nature, without the Holy Spirit in him – can neither understand nor accept the things of God.

Or in Romans 8, where we read, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." Those in the flesh – meaning those who have not yet been given the new birth of water and Spirit – cannot submit to God's law, cannot please God, and are in fact hostile to God.

Jesus Himself teaches this same truth when He says earlier in John's Gospel, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Other places in Scripture, such as St. Paul's various references in Romans 3, continue this same teaching.

The Jews cannot hear the word of Jesus and believe it, in part, because their sinful nature is incapable of it. And this is true for all people, all those who share this sinful nature, everyone. No one is born neutral in this world and then shifts one way or the other based on outside influences. No, we are all born in sin, all spiritually dead before we even leave our mothers' wombs.

Yet our Lord overcomes this spiritual deadness by bringing us to life. The words that Jesus speaks are spirit and life. The Holy Spirit uses the word to bring dead hearts to life, to open deaf ears to hear the Gospel, to restore spiritual blindness that we might see the truth.

God the Holy Spirit also works to do this in Holy Baptism, where as Jesus tells Nicodemus, someone is born of water and the Spirit and therefore able to enter the Kingdom of God. It is God who

knits us together in our mothers' wombs, and it is God who grants us faith to believe in His Son, and by believing be saved from eternal death.

This new life, this gift of faith, it can be rejected, though. This is the second way in which the Jews in the reading are unable to hear the words of Jesus, and it's a great tragedy.

Earlier in this chapter of John's Gospel, we hear that these Jews heard the words of Jesus and in fact believed in Him. And so Jesus, seeking to grow that new faith, tells them, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Jesus is pointing out the simple reality that, as faith is a living thing, it must be fed to keep alive.

Elsewhere in John's Gospel, Jesus would describe the relationship between Himself and those who believe in Him as a vine and its branches. A branch cut off from the vine will wither and die. A believer who cuts himself off from Jesus and His word will have his faith wither and die.

This causes offense to these newly-believing Jews, who are upset that Jesus says they need to remain in Him, that they are slaves to sin otherwise. They begin arguing with Him that they're children of Abraham and have never been slaves of anyone.

Jesus points out that Abraham believed the word and sought to honor the God who spoke it, rather than thinking he could do whatever he wanted since God had given him the promise. The people then get even more offended when Jesus states the truth that, if you don't have God for your Father and His word in your heart, then there is another who is your father – the devil – and his lies will fill your heart.

This basic truth, that there are only two sides to the spiritual realm – God, and those opposed to God – is all throughout the Old Testament. Yet hearing that they are quickly moving toward the wrong side, if not there already, enrages the Jews. They go from believing in Jesus to attacking Him.

And since they can't prove any sin or wrongdoing in Him, or find any holes in His arguments, they resort to name-calling and slander. "The Jews answered him, 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?'" They accuse Jesus of being a half-breed, not a full son of Abraham, and even more they say He is demon possessed.

Here they cross the point of no return: they say that Jesus is working, not by the power of the Spirit of God, but by an evil spirit. This is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the unforgivable sin. In calling the Spirit of God the spirit of wickedness, they have hardened their hearts for good.

This doesn't mean that God ceases to love them. Note that Jesus continues to speak to them, to teach them the truth. Yet they have stopped up their ears and refuse to hear it. Jesus holds out the promise of eternal life, that those who keep His word will never see death, and they slap that offer away and blaspheme Him all the more. The truth of the prophecies, the evidence of the great signs, it's all thrown out by the hatred for God to which they have given themselves over.

They have planted themselves firmly in the camp of the devil, the one who was a murderer from the beginning, and they show this in their murderous actions. Jesus speaks the truth, the truth that ought to bring them joy: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM," revealing in no

uncertain terms that He is Yahweh, the Lord God come to save His people. But what do the people do? Pick up stones to murder Him. Hence Jesus hid Himself and left them.

One moment, they had believed, the Holy Spirit newly dwelling in their hearts, the promise of eternal life given to them. The next moment, they have driven the Holy Spirit from their hearts, rejected the word of life spoken to them, and sought to put to death the author of life.

This is a stark warning for us. We dare not think that just because someone believed at one point, he will believe forever. "Once saved, always saved" is not Scriptural truth. This is paralleled in our physical life. It comes from God; none of us consciously and rationally chooses the moment we come into this world. Yet God gives us the awful ability to end our lives if we choose.

It is the same for our spiritual life. God and God alone grants it as a free gift, given purely out of His grace and mercy. But we have the awful ability to end that life, either by outright rejection or by simply letting faith starve and wither away.

Yet we need not fear that this can happen to us against our will. God grants that new life, and God sustains it by His Spirit who dwells in our hearts. The devil and the world may – will – try to attack us through temptation. But the Lord who resisted the devil's temptations in the wilderness will give us the strength to resist the temptations we face. As Scripture says, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

The crosses and suffering we endure in this life will at times be terrible, but our Lord endured the cross for our sake, and He suffers with us, even as He uses the suffering to strengthen our faith.

He has given us His word – the Holy Bible – through which He both calls us away from sins that separate us from Him and in which He speaks to us words of comfort, peace, and promise.

He puts His seal on us in Holy Baptism, and as we hear in Revelation, those who are sealed are not under the power of the evil one, but are protected by the Lord Almighty.

His sets His table in the presence of our enemies, His Supper being not just some remembrance of Him but His physical coming to us to strengthen and encourage us.

Our Savior has encased us in the impenetrable armor of God and placed in our hand the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God, the weapon against which Satan cannot stand. The only way we can be defeated is if we take off the armor, if we drop the sword.

And when we are tempted to do this, we need only cry out to Christ, our great High Priest. He is the I AM, the God who loved us so much He offered Himself as the all-atoning sacrifice, and because of that love He will never leave us nor forsake us. He constantly intercedes to the Father on our behalf, even as He walks with us through this life.

As we approach Holy Week and contemplate all the events of our Lord's Passion, we're not seeing merely a good teacher who leading us to make rational decisions, but the Lord of all, I AM, giving up His life so that we might never see death.

In the name of Jesus, amen.