



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **The Ordinary Kind of Holiness**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Isaiah 2: 10-17
Epistle Romans 6: 3-11
Gospel Matthew 10: 34-42

At last a truly ordinary Sunday. It is not Philippine Independence Day and not Father's Day, just the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, what our Roman Catholic brethren call the long green season of "ordinary time." And today we must deal with the most ordinary of topics: our death to sin and our living resurrected lives. This really is the ordinary stuff of the Christian life. Day by day, as we read in the letter to the Hebrews (12: 1-2), we are "to throw off everything that hinders us, and the sin that so easily entangles, and run with perseverance the race set out before us." Do you struggle with habits you know are sin? Nothing very special in that. It is the ordinary experience of all who "fix their eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Today we look at ordinary sin, in normal Christian lives.

Now last Friday was a special day. I was reminded of it as I began a 15-hour drive from the southern most tip of Luzon back to Manila. As I passed through the small towns of Bikol throngs of youths gathered beside the road, all too eager to "baptize" my passing vehicle. Good that I could switch to air-con and roll up the windows. There were not a few jeepney passengers ahead of me for whom, I suspect, this tradition was not exactly a joy-filled remembrance of the John the Baptist's birthday! Rather it was one more example of original sin taking delight in something which "the law" would prohibit!

Two weeks ago we began this series with an examination of how trust in God is the only way to true freedom. God has delivered us from what enslaved us and from all that separated us from him. But we are not, therefore, independent from all constraint, free to do whatever gives us pleasure. Rather, we saw that God's purpose for us was to become interdependent with Jesus, resulting in righteousness.

Then last week, in the second half of Romans chapter five, looked at what the Father did in Jesus to reverse the effects of Adam's rebellion. We considered the

effects of being separated from God, and especially the end result when this separation continues in hell. I ended by pointing out that Paul had bracketed his comparison of Adam's way of living and Jesus' way with a bold statement that just trying to obey the rules does not solve our problem, nor was the Law ever intended to solve the problem of sin.

Today Paul leads us through the implications of our baptism being, in reality, the death of our sin-controlled old life. Somehow, what Paul has in mind, seems quite removed from the baptism which Bikol's children freely offered to those driving through their barrios. I suspect that John would prefer his birthday to be remembered with acts of repentance, with turning to God in obedient trust. That's the ordinary stuff that fills so much of the believer's life.

Jesus' words in today's gospel help us understand why Paul uses baptism as his starting point. The kind of love which God has for us is a profound concern for what is best for us, and a covenantal commitment to act for our good even if it costs him greatly, even if we do not "feel good" about his love, even if there must be formation of new habits, discipline and, at times, punishment. For the Father knows that ultimately nothing will heal the mortal effects of Adam's sin in our lives than a day-by-day, moment-by-moment death to that "old life". We must choose to die each time we face temptation. Only a deep-rooted awareness of what Jesus did for us, and our love for him because of it, will keep us making the choice to die to sin.

Jesus demonstrates this way of love by going to the cross. He did for each of us what none of us can do for ourselves. His was a totally adequate death as far as our need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God the Father. And Jesus' experience of the cross presumes a corresponding cross-experience for us. Jesus' cross is the way by which we are to live out our apprenticeship to him and our sonship to our Father. "Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." The cross referred to in this verse, our cross, is the total surrender of our will, plans, actions and desires to Jesus. It is a "cross" because our surrender will feel like we are dying. Indeed we are dying to all we clutch tightly in our hands; we lose all that for us was essential in life. It is a cross because it will humiliate us with no less shame than our Lord endured as he was unjustly beaten, publicly rejected, and hung naked beside the road leading into the city he should have ruled as King.

Our experience of the cross may be dramatic and happen quickly over the period of a few weeks, or it may be experienced over many years, as we let go of one area after another where we cling to our plans, our abilities, and our attempts to be worthy of the Father's love. Try to keep it and we are sure to lose it; let it go and we will discover that what we really wanted is returned to us, better than we could have imagined.

Now we need to take a close look at what Paul wrote in Romans chapter six. Take your bulletin and follow along with me. Is continuing to sin an option for the believer? Paul says it is not, for the reality of our commitment to Christ is a death to all we were apart from Christ. As believers, (look at verse 2): "We died to sin." Or verse 3: "We were baptized into his death." And verse 4: "We were buried with him through baptism into death." The image Paul is referring to is baptism by immersion into a river or pool, such that the one who by baptism is identifying with Jesus and declaring his trust in Jesus, is "buried" in the water. Then, when she or he is lifted

out of the water, it is as though she were coming out of a grave, as though he were being raised from a watery tomb.

Paul's inference is simple and straight-forward: There is only one reason for raising a person from death. It is so that she can live a new life. It is so that he can share right now in Jesus' resurrected life. Look at verse 6: "If we have been united with Jesus like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection." Is this some future resurrection that Paul is thinking of? Jump ahead to verses 10 and 11: "The death Jesus died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Paul's conclusion is not that some day, after the death of our mortal bodies, we will be raised to new life. No, he instructs us to count ourselves dead to sin right now. This is a mental process. It is to consider something to be true, to think in a certain way about what we are experiencing. When temptation to sin comes to your thoughts through your desires, you are to consider yourself to be dead. Think of yourself as a corpse as far as that temptation is concerned. But as far as your life in Christ, think of yourself as one who already has been raised from death. When I ask myself the question, "What will this thing I desire so badly right now look like in a day, in a month, at the end of my life, when I am with Jesus, and he is asking me, 'Was it worth it?'"—when I ask this, I often find that the desire for sin fades away.

Let's be very clear. Temptation to sin is not, in itself, sin. For example, the initial thought of revenge in the instance of being betrayed by a friend, is not sin. It is a temptation, but I may still turn from it. And no temptation comes from God, but instead we are tempted by our own sinful desires, and by circumstances in this fallen world, and by demonic beings. But we always have the choice to turn from the temptation and not sin. It is not a biblical worldview that sees temptation as a fatalistic, pre-determined pathway to unavoidable sin.

If, however, we meet the temptation with lingering consideration, if, in our example, the first thought of revenge becomes a pondering of how we may most hurt our betrayer, then we will have entered the cycle of sin from which James tells us there is no escape until the sin we have conceived in thought is carried full-term, and having been born as an act, results again in our experience of death. The same is true if we meet the initial temptation trusting our own ability to withstand it. If we meet temptation with that subtle pride which grows from past battles won, thinking, "I've been here before and Satan has not had his way. I won't let him have it now either," inevitably we are surprised by an unintended conception, to again use James' image.

No, Paul reminds us in Romans that the only response to temptation which will result in resurrected life is to consider myself dead. What does this look like in practice? Well, for a start, it means that I am consistently telling myself the truth about myself, which goes something like this, "Lord, I cannot resist this temptation. Only you can live your holy life in me. I cannot; but you can."

Second, it will require telling myself the truth about the temptation. There is no place for good-looking-on-the-outside religiosity in this daily battle against sin. I say to myself, "Lord, what my brother did in betraying me was really wrong. I am deeply hurt." But I would also be quick to add, "Lord I am not wise enough to know all his motives, or punish him fairly. Repaying betrayal is something you need to be doing, not me." Or in another context I might say, "Jesus, that is a very nice house and I wish I made a salary adequate to live there." But then I would add, "Jesus, that

house is not mine. You own all houses in spite of what human land titles say. You have promised to provide what I need. I want to be content in your provision."

And thirdly we are required to refute whatever hold past habits of sin have had upon us. So as temptation comes I say, "Jesus, you have told me that you are my master now. Sin is not in control, not even the deeply habituated sin I so often find at work in me. Jesus right now I do not allow sin to reign in my mortal body. Come, be my Lord. I entrust every part of me, mind and body to you."

This kind of praying is the ordinary stuff of the new life we have in Jesus. This is not the internal thought-life of a super-saint. This is the normal Christian life. No where in Scripture does it say that our day-by-day walk in holiness comes without effort and without our participation in the process. What it does say is this (Phil. 2:12-13), "In the same way as you have always obeyed, continue to work through the issues of your salvation with awe and reverence, for it is really God who is at work in you, both to will, and to do the good that he purposes in you."

We cannot begin the tasks of this new life until we are convinced that just as we were slaves to sin, we are now, through Jesus being alive in us, slaves of righteousness. As long as we think we are doing ok, or that, for the most part, we can handle it, or that "we must only do our best, and God will do the rest"—(was there ever a saying as straight from hell as is that one!)—as long as we think in these ways we cannot live the resurrected life Jesus has for us.

Please pray with me: Jesus I am trusting you to live in me in the midst of moment-by-moment temptations to sin. I do not trust myself. I am so aware of your incredible love for me. I really want this new life which you have shown me. I love you. Do this in me so that our love may grow better and better. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.