

## **Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – July 5, 2020**

### **Introduction**

**My homily this week focuses on the innate nature of our brokenness as human beings.** I intentionally chose not to lead with the word ‘sin’ because it immediately colors our ability to talk about its true meaning. We often think about sin as a laundry list of things that we should not do because such acts are offensive to God and destructive forces in our lives. While this is true, human sin is far more complex.

**Sin is rebellion against God.** There can be no other way to think about it. Sin is not a little misstep here and there. Sin is integral to our being. It is our declaration of independence from God. We desire to control our lives –Not at the exclusion of God, but rather by giving God the minimum required so that we might be masters of what is left. We desire to be unfettered and unbound – Doing what we want, when we want, for our own gratification.

**What happens to individuals is mirrored in our communities.** Multiplied over and over, the inevitable extension of our individual brokenness is society that disregards the needs of the poor and hungry; a society that understands sexuality as a tool for marketing and self-expression; a society where wealth is the measure of one’s ultimate value; and a society that is intolerant of those who are different than we are.

**Contrary to what we might say or believe, we are accountable for our sins.** However, I believe that our society has a problem with accountability. No one accepts responsibility for what they do, or for what happens to them because of their actions. The consequences are always someone else’s fault. In a perverse way, this often has provided Christians with a way of rationalizing their sinful actions; an excuse, if you will. The tempter has become someone to blame; someone other than ourselves who is responsible for the things we do that run contrary to God’s holy Law. If not the evil one, we blame our circumstances for our misdeeds.

**However, God will have none of it. God knows our innermost thoughts and desires. We are prodigal sons and daughters who have chosen to leave home because we think we are better off away from the Father.** But life has not been better. We are alone, and apart from God we will certainly die.

***But all is not lost. There is a word of grace.*** Despite our ill-fated beginnings, our fascination with sin, and the brokenness in our lives: God is still with us. God has not abandoned us in the darkness of our sin. Through the Holy Spirit, God calls us to repentance and enables us to believe in that Jesus died for our sins. The good news is that *‘neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come. . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’* [Romans 8:38ff].

***My homily for this week uses another metaphor that I think will be useful for understanding our brokenness. It is entitled: ‘The Games People Play.’***

***Pastoral Note – This past week has seen a marked increase of coronavirus infections, especially in the ‘Sun Belt’ our nation.*** Texas, Florida, Arizona, and California have had significant spikes in infection rates. So far, Minnesota seems to have ‘flattened the curve’ to some extent. However, this is not the time to have changes in our practices of mask wearing and social distancing. We have come so far, and I urge you to continue your faithfulness in

***A number of churches across the nation are gathering for worship without face masks while disregarding social distancing.*** Unfortunately, there are some pastoral websites carry statements from clergy suggesting to their church membership that *‘one must trust God to protect us’* as they gather for worship. ***I believe that this is irresponsible.*** God has given us the gift of science and we need to trust the input medical and public health professionals who give us science-based guidelines to follow. We must do what we know works as we await the development of a vaccine. protecting yourself, your families, and those around you. Rest assured; we are not going to rush back into the sanctuary because we can legally do so. We will do so only when it is safe for all of us; ***but now is not the time.***

***In the meantime, we will continue with ‘parking lot communion’*** several times a month. Please watch Facebook, our churches websites, and email for notification of time and place. Take care of yourselves and continue your good work!

***In Christ ✝,  
Pastor Steve***

### **Scripture Lesson – Romans 7.15-25a**

*Paul writes to the church in Rome:* I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

### **Gospel – Matthew 11.16-30**

*Jesus said to the disciples,* “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that

on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.”

At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

### ***“The Games People Play”***

**Let us pray.** Holy Father, send your Spirit upon us tonight as you speak to us through the words of your Son. Open our ears to the good news of salvation so that we who are captive to sin might be set free. Shake us out of our comfortable pews, dear God, for it is in hearing your Word that we live. Let the New Age of salvation dawn in our lives this day as we hear Jesus’ call to follow him. In his name we pray, amen.

***Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.***

**The games people play.** Right after I finished college and long before I was married, my brother and I and my friend Julian went skiing at Snowbird Ski Resort in Utah. We all had skied a good deal in the Twin Cities area and did quite well on Minnesota hard-pack; but skiing in the mountains is a different story. The runs are steep and long. In some places there’s powder snow; in other places, there are moguls (bumps) as big as earthmovers. But none of this dampened our enthusiasm.

We immediately went to the tram to try our luck on the highest expert run. After putting on our skis at the top of the run, we noticed three young women who seemed to be stranded in a field of large moguls some 300 feet below us. I looked at Julian and Ken and said, ‘*They look like they need help.*

*Let's ski down to them.'* With that, I planted my poles and pushed off. My first two turns were flawless; but on my third turn, I caught the tip of my ski on a mogul and flipped head over heels down the hill. My skis released and started to windmill over my head. And since I'm not a small person, my momentum carried me down the slick snow faster and faster. I slid by the supposedly stranded skiers and didn't stop until I hit a tree a hundred feet below them. Later that night, we did see them at a restaurant; but they just smiled and walked away . . . *I'm certain that I impressed them . . .* ***The games people play.***

Before I went to the seminary, I was plant manager for a mid-sized factory in the Twin Cities. We had a worker named Chris who never seemed to do anything. He was always walking around in the plant, from one department to another, interrupting the others. Chris had been disciplined several times with written warnings and suspensions. I also suspected him of stealing power drills from the company, but I could never prove it. Then one day, as Chris was punching out at 4:30, someone bumped the catch on his lunch box. Two rolls of company toilet paper tumbled out onto the floor. Chris denied that he had stolen them. It was obvious he said, someone had put them there. ***The games people play.***

In my first parish, a very well to do retired farmer invited me over to his house to talk about his stewardship and the Church. He told me proudly that he tithed 10% of his income. I said, *'Oh really? That's quite a gift.'* [I knew how many acres he farmed.] Then he said to me, *'Don't get the wrong idea, pastor. I tithe 10% of my social security income, not my farm income — I can't afford to tithe everything; it would cost me too much money . . . The Church would just spend it anyway.'* ***The games people play.***

It should be no surprise that today's Gospel is about ***'the games people play'*** with God . . . ***Games*** that are very real . . . ***Games*** that unmask us for who we really are . . . ***Games*** that can make the difference between life and death. Jesus asks his listeners, ***"TO WHAT SHALL I COMPARE THIS GENERATION? IT IS LIKE CHILDREN SITTING IN THE MARKETPLACES AND CALLING TO ONE ANOTHER, 'WE PLAYED THE FLUTE AND YOU DID NOT DANCE; WE WAILED***

**AND YOU DID NOT MOURN.” FOR JOHN CAME NEITHER EATING AND DRINKING, AND THEY SAY, ‘HE HAS A DEMON;’ THE SON OF MAN CAME EATING AND DRINKING, AND THEY SAY, ‘LOOK, A GLUTTON AND DRUNKARD, A FRIEND OF TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS!’”**

When he finished speaking, Jesus then drew upon image he had seen in the marketplace: a group of children trying to decide what game to play. One says, “Let’s play wedding.” The group says, “No . . . We don’t feel like being happy today.” “Ok,” says another, “let’s play funeral.” But the group says, “No . . . We don’t feel like being sad today.” And so it goes . . . They never can quite decide what they want to do.

It seems to me that Jesus is talking about people who play the ‘*religion game*.’ But what they don’t realize is that the stakes in this game are very high. Jesus uses the children in the marketplace as a metaphor to explain how people ‘*play at religion*.’ This parable describes how people react when confronted by the Kingdom when they encounter John the Baptist and Jesus. Their words are not heard and they are both rejected by those who hear them. John lived as an ascetic and was criticized for not eating or drinking. The people said, ‘**He has a demon!**’ Jesus, on the other hand, was criticized for eating and drinking. They said he was glutton and drunkard who associates with sinners. **The games people play with God.** They are not inclined to accept the Kingdom or its messengers, even though one preaches judgment, and other, forgiveness. **The games people play . . .** They will do anything to avoid an encounter with the Kingdom . . . Even to the point of playing the ‘*religion game*’ with God.

In his letter to the Roman congregation, Paul explores this deadly game and calls it what it really is: ‘**sin**.’ He talks about sin in a profoundly personal way. According to Paul, our decision-making is faulty . . . we choose to sin against God and each other . . . To sin is to rebel against God even though we know in our heart that it will bring about our own death. And tragically, it’s a game that people play, even though they’re bound to lose. We play thinking that God is deceived by our petty deceptions and slights of hand.

Sin isn't something we do occasionally. Sin is a state of mind; a way of operating that puts us at odds with everything God intends for us. We are sinners through and through. Everything we do is tainted by our brokenness. Despite our best intentions, we always end up acting in our own best self-interest. Paul alludes to this in his Letter to the Romans. He writes, **'I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.'**

**So what is Paul talking about here?** Some have suggested that he's talking about the all-too familiar human struggle against temptation. You know what I mean: The neighbor who wants to be kind, but still can't wait to spread the latest piece of delicious gossip . . . The politician who is an idealist, but must compromise dearly held principles to 'get business done' . . . Or the high school student who studies hard and wants to get high grades, but sometimes copies other students' work to be successful.

But others have suggested something more subtle . . . something far more dangerous. Sometimes we can fool ourselves into thinking we are followers of Jesus by living a one-dimensional piety that serves our own self-interest. In other words, we set the agenda for our lives, rather than allowing God to do so. At times, the voices of those who call themselves 'Christian' are as strident and destructive of those who have no relationship with Jesus. We know that we all have difficulty being as compassionate or as loving as Jesus. We can will what is right, but most of the time, we cannot do it because we are yoked to the world.

The yoke of this world is an iron chain that binds our every move. We are in bondage to our self-will and pride. We are confident that we can handle anything that comes along as we seek success at all costs. To this burdensome yoke, we add our accumulated grief, our bitterness, our vanity, our envy, and our loneliness. It is only a matter of time before the load becomes unbearable. And tragically, the old Adam and Eve within us insist upon bearing this burden alone.

And Jesus said, **'COME TO ME, ALL WHO LABOR AND ARE HEAVY LADEN, AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST. TAKE MY YOKE UPON YOU, AND LEARN FROM ME; FOR**

**I AM GENTLE AND LOWLY IN HEART, AND YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. FOR MY YOKE IS EASY, AND MY BURDEN IS LIGHT.'**

Living in the era of mechanized farming, most of us know little of yokes and how they work. I am told that a yoke was carefully sized for a particular animal – Sized so that it fits comfortably around the horse's or the ox's neck. The animal that bears a yoke, shares its load with another; the strong paired with the weak. But even more important, with the yoke, comes direction. No longer does an animal wander aimlessly about the field. Wearing a yoke enables it put its energies to constructive use in service to its master. **So also for us.** The yoke he offers is fitted especially to us. This happens in Baptism when Jesus calls us by name to be his brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. Under the sign of water, we are yoked with him for all of eternity; the strong with the weak so that the burdens of life might be shared.

To be a follower of Jesus is to be yoked with him. And to be yoked with him is to be certain of his presence . . . and to be certain of his presence is to love others . . . and to love others is to take up his ministry. This yoke means that there is nothing in our lives that Jesus has not already experienced. Anxiety, loneliness, and fear of our own mortality are maladies that afflict us today; but they are known to Jesus because he is one of us. Today, **it is this Jesus** who offers us his yoke . . . **It is this Jesus** who stands ready to intercede for us before the Father . . . **It is this Jesus** who died so that we might live.

On Easter morning, **Almighty God declared** once and for all that sin's old game is over. **He declared** that we are yoked to Jesus in life, in death, and in life again. **He declared** that '**... neither death, nor life, ... nor things present, nor things to come, ... nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**' Sin is the game people play . . . **BUT THAT GAME IS OVER** . . . Jesus has won . . . And because Jesus has won, so have we. Amen.