

Sermon for Grace Church, West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana
Proper 9, July 9 2017

Let's be real, we do sin. The reality of our lives in Christ is this; we are sinners, all of us are sinners. Miserable sinners in the hands of angry God? I hope not. St. Paul's struggle with this reality in the 7th Chapter of his Epistle to the Romans is a very honest account of an early Christian to deal with reality. St. Paul did not struggle alone with reality, nor do we struggle alone. A brief look at Christian history would demonstrate that the Creeds, that is the Apostle's Creed and the Nicean Creed are largely, attempts of the one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church to deal with the distortions that some taught as truth in the struggle to deal with the reality of sin. Some who thought themselves to be "in the know", the Gnostics, taught various doctrines, perhaps derived from pagan cults, that denied that God is unique (some thought there were two Gods, one good and one evil). Other Gnostics, known as Docetists, taught that Jesus did not take on human flesh, in others words, they denied the Incarnation. As Fr. Bonell Spencer wrote in *Ye are the Body*, There were two general, practical conclusions of Gnosticism. The first was that the body should be killed by ascetic exercises (see *Ye are the Body, Bonell Spencer, page 65*) and secondly, that since the body is separate from the soul, it matters not what the body does. That idea sold good then and sells good now. Needless to say, this second alternative proved much more popular than the ascetic alternative. One of the most interesting perversions in Gnosticism was the

Donatist Controversy in north Africa. Here is a question, can sin committed after Baptism be forgiven? Can apostolic truth be demonstrated by one who sinned in order to live during the Great Persecutions of the Church instead of accepting martyrdom? Some would suggest that the first “Christian Emperor”, Constantine the Great, only accepted Baptism on his death bed so that he would not sin after Baptism. One group of Donatists, drawn almost entirely from rural poor, lived to be martyred. They carried with them clubs, or bludgeons, which they called Israels. They were given to great drunkenness which they saw as a preparation for martyrdom. In fact, one of their practices was to confront a traveler with a shout of “Praise to God”, and tell that traveler that they would be killed if they did not kill the circumcellion. (see *The Donatist Church*, by W.H.C Frend, pages 174-175)What a bleak choice but they believed that they became martyrs instantly and thus were saved from sin. St. Augustine of Hippo struggled with the Donatist cult. I would note that some of the same emotional content of millennia old perversions seem to evident again today. to wit: the desire for a pure Church (whatever my personal ideas of purity may be)and a festering envy that cannot be satisfied. Some historians would suggest that this fourth century aberration so weakened the Church in north Africa that it was easily susceptible to the influence of Islam centuries later. Now, this trip down memory lane, which is likely prone to easy exaggeration and simplification, is to demonstrate our forebears struggle to deal with the reality, we are sinners.

Salvation is accessible to sinners, such is the good news in which we rejoice this morning as Episcopalian Christians. From the fourth General

Council of the undivided Church, meeting at Ephesus, this has been the universal teaching of the Church living in the reality of what St. Augustine wrote, “it is not possible not to sin.” Abundant Grace triumphs over the reality of our sinful self.

In our PrayerBook today there are “comfortable words” (at least in Rite One) that express my (and I hope, our) hope in the Abundant Grace of God. After Jesus’ words of rebuke and warning as recorded by St. Matthew in the Gospel for today, there come comfortable words, “Come to me all you that are weary and 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.” What a comfort is this reality, words of grace, words of salvation, words of hope as we deal with life and the realities thereof . . . God’s grace abounds, that is the greater reality of the Christian life.