

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
St. Luke 18:9-14; Genesis 4:1-15

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

I'm going to say it again: there are only two religions in the world. If it's been a while since you've heard me say that, you may be surprised to hear it. After all, there are multiple -isms and -anities out there, and it's impossible to keep them all straight. Volumes have been written which only give synopses of the world's many religions. However, when you get to the core tenets and facets of these world religions, they fall only into two types of religions. In many ways, they are polar opposites, yet they can be indistinguishable in many instances. And while the religions are polar opposites, the core tenets are, for all intents and purposes, complementary. Today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons show the two religions at work

One religion is that of the Law; the other is the religion of the Gospel. Law and Gospel are complementary in that you cannot have one without the other—the Law shows you your need for the Gospel, since you cannot keep it, and the Gospel tells you that the Law is fulfilled for you by another. However, the religion of the Law and the religion of the Gospel are polar opposites. St. Paul relates that the religion of the Law is of the devil, the world, and your sinful flesh. He states that this religion is the way of death. For, walking "according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience...in the lusts of [the] flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind,...by nature children of wrath," adherents to the religion of the Law are dead in the trespasses and sins. (cf. Ephesians 2:1-3) Elsewhere, the apostle wrote, "...the law brings about wrath...." (Romans 4:15a) However, the religion of the Gospel declares that we are saved by grace through faith—and this faith is the gift of God, it is from the Gospel, not borne of works, not of the Law, lest anyone should boast. (cf. Ephesians 2:8-10)

Case in point is the sibling rivalry on display in the Old Testament lesson. Now, it seems perfectly safe to say that Abel saw no rival in Cain, but Cain certainly saw a rival in Abel. When the two brought their offerings to God, and He respected Abel's offering but not Cain's, Cain was disheartened and angry. Why did God respect Abel's offering, but not Cain's? Some say that Abel's offering was the firstborn of his flock, which the Scripture says, but Cain's was not, which the Scripture does not say. The answer, or the clue to it if you like, is in God's response to Cain's sullen face:

Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.

Cain did not do well—his offering was not respected or accepted.

How did he not do well; he brought an offering? In other words, he did what he was supposed to do, as did his brother. So, what's the difference? A logical conclusion, based on all of this, is that Cain brought his offering because it was required of him and for no other reason. You could say that he begrudgingly did what was required of him. Yes, he did it, but his heart just wasn't in it.

Abel, on the other hand, brought his offering out of a sense of gratitude. He did it, yes, and his heart was in it. He was thankful to be alive, to know God, to have received from God the very flocks he was herding.

It's the same difference in attitude that is expressed in the sentiment, "You don't got to go to church, you get to go to church." While the first half of that isn't exactly true, if you can excuse poor grammar. God most certainly wants you in church, but why are you here? If you're here simply because it is required of you, then you are really no better off than Cain. If you're here because you are grateful for everything that God has done for you and desire more of His goodness, grace, and mercy for your forgiveness, life, salvation, and peace, then you have done well. Hear that cautiously, though.

Cain and the ones who are here simply because they have to be are those who belong to the religion of the Law. The Law says to do something, and to the best of your desire and ability, you begrudgingly do it. Sin lies at the door. It's there knocking and pushing its way in, convincing you that God is not as gracious as He makes Himself out to be, that He is not merciful but vengeful, and you need to do your damndest to appease Him, but maybe you shouldn't try too hard, because He's just going to reject you anyway. Damndest is an appropriate word, for it's the religion of the Law at work, followed to death by the children of wrath.

Abel and the ones who are here because they get to be are those who belong to the religion of the Gospel. They hear the voice of Jesus in His called servant, who gives them the gifts of God, and respond in kind, grateful for all that they have been given. The Law says to do something, and by way of revelation, you know that you cannot do it, and so you confess your shortfall—your sins—and beseech God for forgiveness. Sin lies at the door, but by way of confession and absolution, you rule over it, for you confess it for what it is, that for it you deserve to die, but thanks be to God in Jesus Christ, you are alive, because He died for you and rose again!

Now, I said you had to hear some words cautiously; that if you are here because you get to be, grateful for what you have been given, then you have done well. Here's the lesson not to take away from Abel, that if you give the best of what you are given, then you will earn God's favor. That's blurring the lines between the religion of the Gospel and the religion of the Law, to make the two indistinguishable. The truth of the matter is that you already have the favor of God for the sake of Jesus Christ, so there is nothing you need to do in order to earn it.

The Law demands full and perfect obedience to its every ordinance. "Do this," it says, "and do not do that." Every jot and tittle must be adhered to, and then salvation is earned. However, this is the way of death. Why? Because you can never keep every jot and tittle, and you won't get by simply by "doing your best." The Law is black and white: "Do this and do not do that—keep on the straight and narrow; any little slip up is a transgression." Show me a man who claims to have kept the Law perfectly, and I will show you a liar; as Martin Luther once penned, "The Law says, 'Do this,' and it is *never* done" (emphasis mine).

Yet, there is One who did keep the Law perfectly, and He is certainly no liar, for God does not lie. He is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God-in-the-flesh, sent to be the propitiation for the sins of the world, for your sins, dear hearers. Jesus kept it perfectly because it is His Law, and He knows it better than anyone else does, but more-so because He was to be the perfect Lamb of God, spotless, without blemish; the perfect offering in your place for the sins of the world—for your sins. And so, on a very good Friday, on a hill outside of Jerusalem, Jesus offered His life for yours, nailed to a cross and shedding His blood for your remission, the just demand of the Law for sin—for your sin. Risen from the dead, Jesus Christ is now the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep, even you, dear hearers. For, as the apostle also wrote, "For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

By Jesus' dying and rising again to life, you have favor with God, apart from any works or merits in and of yourself. Again, it was Martin Luther who penned, "The Gospel says, 'Believe in this,' and everything is already done." Everything is already done, even your faith, your believing in this. What is this? That Jesus Christ is your salvation, who died on the tree of the cross for your sins, washing you in His most precious blood shed at Calvary in the waters of Holy Baptism, redeeming you from the bondage to sin and death and the religion of the Law. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9) This is the religion of the Gospel—trusting, receiving, and believing that you are saved by grace; everything is already done for you, even the trusting, receiving, and believing.

This is where the Pharisee and the Publican from Jesus' parable come in. You see, sometimes the religion of the Law seeks to convince you that you are good enough, and has you boast in your

works. It wants you to trust in yourself, that you are righteous enough. If there is an overarching fault of the Pharisees, this is it. So, Jesus tells the parable:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

You might well imagine the Pharisees who heard Jesus tell the parable at first nodding to it in agreement. For, as He began, He gave no indication why He was telling it. St. Luke fills in that blank based on what Jesus says to end the parable. As Jesus begins, He introduces a Pharisee who boasts in his works—what he is not like and what he does. It would almost seem as if Jesus is praising the Pharisees for their righteousness, and their smiles would get wider and wider as one by one the merits are mentioned: not like other men, fasts twice a week, gives tithes of everything he possesses.

Then, Jesus turns to the publican. This traitor and enemy of the state collected money for the Roman occupiers, taking a profit of the collections for himself. His sin is always before him as he looks at his ledger. This publican knows it, too: looking low and beating his breast in contrition, he says, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" This man, Jesus tells His hearers, this tax collector, this sinner, this man among those "other men," went home justified and not the Pharisee.

The Pharisees are of the religion of the Law. They check off their accomplishments, one by one, boasting in how well they keep the statutes and ordinances. Yet, they don't go home justified. The religion of the Law is the way of death; apart from the justification that Jesus won and gives is death and hell, and those who follow the religion of the Law receive their payment in full. Now, these Pharisees were pretty good at keeping the Law's demands, but not perfect. Whitewashed tombs, Jesus once called them, appearing "beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." (cf. Matthew 23:27)

On the other hand, the publican in today's Gospel is of the religion of the Gospel. He goes to the temple, fully aware of what the Law calls him, and declares as much in his prayer: a sinner. He knows that he is perfectly unable to keep the Law's demands, and pleads for that which the religion of the Gospel says is his by way of the merits of Jesus Christ. He trusts in a righteousness which is not his, but which is given to him by grace through faith in Jesus, the Son of God, who died, making full payment of the Law's demands, that he might have remission, the forgiveness of sins. He pleads for mercy, making confession of his sin, and goes home justified by grace through faith.

Now, let this not be the lesson for you from the publican, that you must make confession of your sins in order to earn justification. To take that away from Jesus' parable would be to blur the lines between the religion of the Law and the religion of the Gospel, to make the two religions indistinguishable. Your confession is not a merit by which you earn that justification, but is a God-given acknowledgement of your status before God of your merits, or lack thereof. The truth of the matter is that you are already justified for the sake of Jesus Christ—that is your status before God for the sake of Christ.

Again, the religion of the Law seeks to deceive you into believing that you are capable earning God's righteousness. This is, perhaps, the most clever of deceptions: that the most humble work you can muster is to confess your sins. "Hey, boasting of your righteousness is great, but you will really win God's respect if you tell him your faults, instead." Such a confession is not made in contrite humility, but in exaltation, bowed head and beaten breast or not. This the greatest lie of the religion of the Law:

it confuses you into thinking it is the religion of the Gospel.

To confess your sins as your work is to become Cain. He brought an offering of his fields because it was required of him. Confessing one's sins because it is required loses sight of the great blessing that confession and absolution brings, which is the comfort in knowing that Jesus Christ bore the full wrath of God in your place for your sins, and that you are not left empty, but forgiven. The confession made by way of the religion of the Gospel is made in grateful acknowledgment in the forgiveness of sins already won by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The absolution spoken to you, then, not only forgives you of your sins in the stead and by the command of Jesus Christ, but also tells you again that the forgiveness you receive is already yours and has always been yours. As was said and bears repeating, "everything is already done," even your confession and especially your forgiveness, all of which is yours by grace, not a work of your own.

It bears mentioning that Cain, that early follower of the religion of the Law, was converted to the religion of the Gospel. As the Old Testament lesson ends, he is being banished from the land as his parents were once banished from Eden—he is being made a vagabond. Cain accepts his punishment; he knows it is just for what he has done, but he still pleads with God for mercy. "If I come upon someone, they will kill me." "Should someone kill you, I will take vengeance upon them sevenfold. In fact, I will put a mark on you so that no one will kill you." There is grace and mercy, even for Cain, who gave an offering simply because he had to, then took the life of his brother.

Let this be the lesson for you from Cain's mark. If you are here simply because you got to be, there is still grace to be had. God, in His infinite mercy and compassion, loves you and gives you the confession of your sins. Confess this sin of heartlessness and be forgiven. Know again the love and grace that your Father in heaven has for you in His Son, and the place at His table that He is preparing for you.

This is what the religion of the Gospel declares to you: that Jesus Christ is your Savior and Redeemer; His merits are yours; He who knew no sin became sin for you that you would become the righteousness of God in Him. (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21, et al) All of this is yours by way of grace through faith, all of it through no merit of your own—of it you cannot boast; rather, let your boasting be in the cross of Christ Jesus your Lord, through which you go to your house justified, because through it by Jesus Christ, you have redemption, the forgiveness of all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.