



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 20 – Proper 25
Year C

Modern-Day Donatism and the Gospel

[RCL]: Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

At a recent church gathering, participants were told to come ready to answer the following question: Which ancient heresy do you think is most prevalent in the church today and why? These questions can be awful, maybe reminding us of those party games where you are asked things like: If you were a vegetable, which one would you be and why? Are you an onion? Cauliflower? An asparagus, because it's an acquired taste? Regardless, the church event turned out to be okay, and one of the most interesting answers to the heresy question was "Donatism."

Which of course raises the question: What is Donatism? Bear with me in a little history. It's actually quite interesting, and maybe knowing something about it will help us avoid making similar mistakes. Donatism affected the church in North Africa in the fourth century. Early in the century, the Roman Emperor Diocletian persecuted Christians. During the persecution, any Christians who renounced their faith, made offerings to the Roman gods, and turned over any sacred scriptures they had were spared. Those who refused — especially those caught with Christian texts they refused to hand over — were usually killed. While many Christians resisted and were martyred, many others did not. They renounced Christianity, allowed their books to be burned, and were spared.

Now, fast forward a little bit. The persecutions die down and with Diocletian's successor, Constantine, it gets a whole lot easier for Christians. So many of those who had denied their faith returned to the Church. But what really upsets people is that a number of clergy who had renounced their faith returned to the church and were functioning as priests and bishops. Many Christians in North Africa did not want to allow lapsed clergy to return. They considered it offensive to the memories of those who had the courage to become martyrs. They might return to the Church as laymen — after an appropriate penance — but not as clergy ever again. This issue split the church and a person named Donatus became the chief spokesman for the rival church. Donatus said lapsed clergy were ineligible to perform the sacraments, and that any which they may have performed were invalid. So, for example, if you were baptized by a lapsed priest, you weren't really baptized. They thought the impurity of the clergy somehow infected the whole church. They wanted a pure church, led by pure clergy, composed of pure members. The opposing church, which became the mainstream church, responded by saying that lapsed clergy could be restored to full authority after having performed appropriate penance. They based this on the concept of forgiveness for all. They

claimed that the holiness of the church is not based on the purity of its leaders or the purity of its members. All are sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God. The holiness of the Church rests entirely upon the holiness of God who in his graciousness forgives us our sins in Jesus Christ. This became the orthodox Christian position.

I think Donatists, both ancient and modern, are people who are really worried that the impurity, moral failings, and erroneous beliefs of others – or perhaps better, what they perceive as the impurity, moral failings, and erroneous beliefs of others — will somehow corrupt or infect them. It's kind of like the kid's notion that we can catch cooties from someone who is a well-known and notorious cootie-monster. There is a grown-up version of this not only in our churches today, but also in the broader culture. People are really concerned with their ideological purity, political purity, nutritional purity, moral purity, you-name-it purity these days. And this modern-day Donatism affects people of all-stripes. There are liberal Donatists and there are conservative Donatists. The incivility of our public discourse is a manifestation of this modern-day Donatism. People treat others with whom they differ not just as folks who they think are wrong, but as ideological cootie-monsters. Liberals who accidentally click on Fox News and conservatives who accidentally click on MSNBC both feel like they have to run to the bathroom and wash their hands. Here's how David Brooks puts it: "This Donatist tendency — to close ranks and return defensively to first principles — can be seen today whenever a movement faces a crisis. Modern-day Donatists emerge after every Republican defeat: conservatives who think the main task is to purge and purify. There are modern-day Donatists in humanities departments, who pull in as they lose relevance on campus."¹

Now, if we are concerned about the Church, we should be troubled by the ways in which Donatism is affecting it. Sadly, the Donatism in the Church often mirrors the modern-day Donatism in the broader culture. Christians simply adopt the rhetoric of the broader culture and then use it in their polemics against other Christians. You know, those whacko progressive Christians. Those conservative Evangelicals. Those wishy-washy Episcopalians. And sadly, the way these labels get used is not just descriptively, but as a way of drawing lines between the pure and the impure, the righteous and the unrighteous, the holy and the godless. Name a hot button issue and you will find a group people claiming that unless you agree with them you are corrupting the faith and the church, and that either you should leave, or they will in search of a purer, more doctrinally correct, more liturgically correct, more politically correct, more you-name-it correct church. Clergy and people from one parish might say, "we are the most progressive church in the diocese," and the clergy and people from another parish might say, "we are the only true Anglo-Catholic church in the diocese." Now, these claims may or may not be true, but it's probable that there is a whole lot of Donatism going on as well.

It seems to be everywhere these days. It's in our broader culture, it's in our churches, and, God help us, it's in our souls. And it's everywhere, perhaps, because it's a manifestation of human sinfulness. As Paul tells us, we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It's the sin that wants to point out the speck in

¹ David Brooks, "How Movements Recover," *New York Times* (March 14, 2013).

our neighbor's eye and ignore the log in our own. It is the human tendency to put ourselves in the place of God, to be the judges of good and evil, of who's in and who's out.

Remember, Jesus had to deal with a similar issue in his day. Some Pharisees complained, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Matthew 9:11, NRSV). To which, Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matthew 9:12-13). The Pharisees thought that Jesus and his followers would somehow catch cooties by eating with sinners and tax collectors. But Jesus says that you've got it upside down. Jesus doesn't get corrupted by coming into contact with sinners. Rather, sinners get healed by coming into contact with Jesus.

So, our Gospel lesson tells us, "Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt" (Luke 18:9). It's the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Today, we could substitute any modern day Donatist for the Pharisee and whomever he or she regards with contempt for the tax collector. *The parable of the true patriot and the latte-sipping liberal. The parable of the enlightened progressive and the backwards redneck. The parable of the orthodox theologian and the heretic.*

Here's the story Jesus tells. Two men, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector, go up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee stands by himself and he really is quite impressive. The Pharisee is a man at home in the temple. He says his prayers. He gives more than he has to. Although the tithe on income was standard, he tithes on everything he has, and many people would have benefited from his generosity. He stands in the correct posture for prayer in the temple, arms raised and head lifted, and basically gives God a progress report. As far as he can tell, he's got it all under control, and he's happy about it. "God," he says, "I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, unrighteous folks, adulterers, or even like that tax collector over there."

Meanwhile, standing off at a distance, is the tax collector. He has got nothing to show for himself, and he knows it. He earned his living by working for a foreign government collecting taxes from his own people. For years he has collected high taxes from his Jewish neighbors to give to the Roman government. He gives the Romans their flat rate on every head and makes his money by charging an excess and keeping it for himself. Basically, he is a crook, a traitor, and a lowlife. He is guilty and he knows it.

He keeps his head lowered as he comes into the temple. We don't know why his guilt has got the better of him today, but there he is in the temple, full of remorse, beating his breast and saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner." He doesn't even promise to shape up. All he does is ask for God's mercy.

The surprise ending of the story is that the Pharisee, who gives a wonderful performance in the temple, goes home empty. He came asking nothing of God and he goes home getting nothing from God. The tax collector, despicable fellow that he is, shows up empty handed asking for God's mercy, and goes home justified, that is, in right relationship with God.

Donatists always go home empty. They are so sure of their holiness and purity that they don't think they need anything from God. Perhaps the only thing they might ask is if God could keep the tax collectors, the impure, at a safe distance so they don't get infected.

Tax collectors and sinners paradoxically go home full. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. When we come into God's presence not trying to puff ourselves up by putting everyone else down, but with an honest and humble acknowledgment of our emptiness, God fills us with his love and forgiveness.

The Church's answer to our Donatism then and always is the good news of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. None of us, none of us, none of us is worthy or deserving of God's grace and mercy. Our Anglicanism, our liberalism, our conservatism, our environmentalism, our vegetarianism, our good works, our acts of piety, our love of puppies will not get us into heaven. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The Good News is that while we were yet sinners, God sent his Son Jesus Christ who through his life, death, and resurrection has made us acceptable in God's sight and through his holiness has made us holy and acceptable in him. My purity or goodness, your purity or goodness, human purity and goodness has nothing to do with it. It is all about God's choice, God's good pleasure, God's grace freely bestowed on us, through the cross of Christ by which we have received forgiveness.

And this, my fellow Donatists, is good news. We have no purity or holiness apart from the grace, love, and mercy of God. Now, how we respond to this good news ought to make a difference in our lives. In gratitude for the free gift of God's grace, we ought to lead better lives, good lives, indeed, holy lives. Now if that sounds like a paradox, it's because it is. It is the paradox Martin Luther describes when he says we are simultaneously sinners and justified, sinful and righteous at the same time. It is the paradox that we are utterly dependent on the forgiveness and grace of God, and that we are also called to a devout and holy life. But the Church, in its wisdom, has said that the call to a holy life ought not to lead to Donatism, the tendency in flawed human beings to purge and purify, to cut others off, and to retreat into enclosed communities of the ideologically pure.

All are one in Christ Jesus our Lord. Jews. Gentiles. Evangelicals. Anglo-Catholics. Conservatives. Liberals. Nascar fans. Opera lovers. Even modern-day Donatists. In Christ, *we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace* that he lavishes upon all of us. My purity, your purity, the Church's purity has nothing to do with it. And for that, we say, thanks be to God.

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