

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 12 February 2023
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany - Year A – Lectionary 6

1st Reading: *Deuteronomy 30:15-20*

Psalm: *119:1-8*

2nd Reading: *I Corinthians 3:1-9*

Gospel: *Matthew 5:21-37*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was a young lad, I played a game called Chutes and Ladders. I expect that many of you are familiar with it. You move along a board, and if you run into a ladder, you move up closer to your goal, but if you land on the top of a chute, you slide back down and have further to go. It seemed like a simple innocent game, based on slides you might find on a playground, and that was mostly just about luck.

But then when we were living in England, and began to have grandchildren, we discovered that they had the same game, but with the name Snakes and Ladders. [Here's our own copy of it that we have for grandchildren to play when they come to our house.] So I began to wonder: Which came first, and why snakes? Why would anybody slide down snakes? Who thought of that?

Well, it turns out that the snakes were earlier than the chutes, much earlier as it turns out - the game may have been invented about 800 years ago, although it may date to an even earlier era - and it was originally intended to be a tool to help teach children right from wrong. The snakes are related to that old serpent, the devil, from the Garden of Eden, and represent temptations to do the wrong things. The ladders, then, may be related to Jacob's Ladder from Genesis, on which he saw angels ascending to heaven, and which later became a symbol for spiritual growth.

So, as we go through life, when we do good, we ourselves become better people, but when we encounter temptations and give in to them, we find ourselves sliding down that slippery slope, which is harmful to both ourselves and to others.

Now I know I have said this before, but it is very important for us to remember that we do not do good things in order to earn a place in heaven, to earn our salvation. In our game of Snakes and Ladders we eventually reach the top and achieve our goal, but that goal is not that we are now “good enough” to save ourselves. If that were the case then Jesus’ death on the cross would have been for nothing - our lives would be unchanged and we would still need to accomplish something ourselves to win our redemption.

No, our redemption comes first. Christ has died, the sinless for us sinners, and has won salvation for us. But now that we have been saved, our salvation is for the purpose of living lives of good, both now and in the age to come when we are resurrected forever.

This is evident from our Old Testament reading this morning, which comes near the very end of Deuteronomy. Moses is about to die, and he is giving the people of Israel his last instructions before they enter the Promised Land. But these instructions are not the rules for how to get to the Promised Land. They are already there, on the verge of crossing the Jordan.

The people have already been saved. God had rescued them from their slavery in Egypt, and had brought them through the Red Sea and through the wilderness, and now they are poised to live out the lives that God intended for them once they reached the Promised Land.

We, too, have already been saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We have been rescued from our slavery to sin, and have been brought through the waters of baptism and are receiving Jesus’ own instructions about how to live out our lives as God intended both now and forever in the resurrection.

So Jesus is not playing games with us, he is not telling us what the rules are so that we can win in some sort of competition with each other. He is showing us just how much our thoughts, our words, and our deeds really matter.

If we think that we have followed all the right rules and that we are set forever, then we need to think again. The rules, the commandments, are there to teach us and show us how we ought to live as the people of God, but none of us follows them perfectly. To use Jesus’ own examples: We may claim that we have certainly never murdered anyone, but do we harbour ill will or hold a grudge against someone for something they may have done to us, someone for whom Christ died just as he died for us? If so, the words and actions that follow such thoughts will not be life-enhancing or helpful for others, but will be discouraging, making their lives and our own less than they should be.

Have we been physically “faithful” to our wives or husbands, but yet harbour secret desires that damage our marital relationships and make ourselves, our spouses, and our unity as a married couple less than what it ought to be? There are so many negative forces in our society which threaten the sanctity of marriage, from pornography to the ease with which we can get a divorce if we don’t feel that we are getting enough out of our marriage for ourselves. Instead of giving our entire beings to each other in marriage we seek only what we think will be good for ourselves individually. These are the dangers Jesus is warning us about.

But he is not saying these things in order to lay more and more rules on us, but to get us to understand why the rules, the commandments, were given in the first place. They are to show us how we can think, speak, and act in ways that are of benefit to others instead of tearing them down. Our thoughts matter. Our words matter, and our actions matter most of all. So instead of taking pride that we’ve never actually murdered someone, we should continue to look for more and more ways to live in such a way that is helpful to those around us.

I know I’ve mentioned before that we have Martin Luther’s Small Catechism in the back of our hymnals, starting on page 1160, and I would encourage all of us to re-read Luther’s explanation of the Ten Commandments because he gives a very succinct statement about just what Jesus is telling us in the Gospel today of how the commandments are intended to inspire us to think and act in love rather than in selfishness.

Luther’s explanation of the commandment “You shall not kill” is to say that “We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbours, but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs”. And his explanation of the commandment “You shall not commit adultery is: “We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honours his or her spouse.”

These are such simple and positive ways for us to approach life and our relationships with others, and this is all God asks of us: to live as the people of God, saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord, to love one another as he has first loved us, in thought, word, and deed.

So as we go along the path of life, let us learn the lesson Jesus is teaching us. When we see the temptations that the old serpent the devil offers us, no matter how innocent they may seem, let us continue right past them rather than sliding down into a pit of despondency, and rather than competing with each other to prove how much more righteous we are than they are, let us help one another up the ladders to a better and better life.

Amen!

