

One Man

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: I wonder how many of you watched last Sunday's Super Bowl game? Those of you who did will remember that there was a point in the second half when the Patriots had the ball and they were moving fairly steadily down the field. But then their drive stalled. They failed to convert on a critical third down play and would have had to turn the ball over to New York—except for a penalty called against the Giants. A player who had just been replaced was running for the sideline, and though he leapt into the air to avoid having a foot on the ground he didn't quite get clear in time. And so for the tiniest fraction of a second after the ball had been snapped, New York had twelve men on the field. Now, nothing this player did had any affect on the play itself. Like I said, he was pretty well airborne and over the sideline. It was only by carefully analyzing the replay tape in slow motion that it could be shown that part of his foot was still within bounds when the play started. But it didn't matter. He was one man too many on the field. So the Patriots got to do the play over, and this time they managed to get the first down.

What's my point? Just this: that tiny little violation that didn't interfere with anything and that had no affect whatsoever on anyone on the field might very well have cost the Giants the game. The whole team (and their fans) might have tasted bitter defeat instead of the sweet victory they now enjoy all because of one man's almost imperceptible misstep. As it turns out, the team managed to recover and achieved their upset win in the last minute of the game. And I'm kind of glad they did because I thought it was pretty low of the Patriot's head coach to make the challenge that got the referees to restudy the play in the first place. It seemed to me that he was trying too hard to win by any means – even by weasely technicalities. Add the fact that New England had a record of illicit spying and, well, let's just say I'm not too sorry for them that they lost.

But the point still stands: we can all understand the basic idea that the difference between winning or losing a game, a season, or a championship title, may all hinge on one player's performance. That final field goal attempt, or free throw, or penalty shot, or turn to bat when it's the bottom of the ninth inning, you're down by a run, there's two runners on base, and you've got two outs and a full count. The whole team's undying fame and eternal glory or ignoble fall into defeat and shame all hang on the performance of one man. If he does well, we all win; if he does poorly we all lose. And if you are a teammate or a fan of the guy who's in the crucible there's nothing you can do about it. You can only watch and see what he does. And we accept this. It's not a question of being fair or unfair; it's simply the way that sports are played. That's the way it is.

And, according to St. Paul in this morning's Epistle lesson, it's also the way it is with life. When all is said and done, everything hangs on the performance of one man. But believe me, it's no game. The consequence of winning or losing in life isn't whether you have your name inscribed on a trophy or get to wear a ring. It's whether you spend eternity in heavenly glory or the flames of hell.

The really bad news is that we start life on the losing team. One man's trespass condemned us all. We heard about that in this morning's very familiar Old Testament lesson. Surrounded by a garden paradise and with only one rule in existence, our first

father managed to break it. So, doing he placed himself and all his descendants under the curse of sin. And from time to time I'll hear people say, "That's not fair! Why should I have to suffer for someone else's offense?" The question betrays a number of misunderstandings or false assumptions. First, we've already seen that what we would call *fairness* is not an issue. It's simply the way it is – and we have to deal with reality the way it is, not the way we might prefer it to be. Second, the person who asks that question implies that if he or she had been the one being tempted, they would have stood their ground. That smacks of the sin of pride and it's almost certainly mistaken. Third, it shows a failure to appreciate what sin really is. It's not merely the violation of an arbitrary command; it's the seduction to renounce the image of God who is self-sacrificing love in favor of placing one's own needs, desires, and gratification above all else. That's what our first parents fell for. And that's what they became when they sinned: self centered, self seeking, self conscious. That's why the first thing they notice after eating the forbidden fruit is that they're naked. They didn't notice before because they weren't focused on themselves. It's this inherent defect that they passed down to us. And now we're so steeped in it, it doesn't even occur to us that it's wrong. We honestly believe that looking out for old number one is a good thing; when it is in fact the exact opposite of what we were created for—of what it means to be made in the image of God.

But what's really interesting is that when referring to the fall, the Bible consistently calls it the sin of one man. Specifically, it's called the sin of Adam, which may seem kind of strange considering there were two of them there and that Eve was the one who actually fell for the temptation first. Why blame it all on him? The simple answer is that it was his fault. He was the one placed in charge. He was the one given God's Word concerning the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It was his duty to relay this Word to his wife. In that sense, he was the world's first prophet or preacher. And Eve was the world's first congregation or church. It was also his duty to protect and defend her. But where is he while she's being tempted by the deceiver? He's standing right next to her like a useless lump. He listens to Satan twisting and turning God's Word, impugning the Lord's motives, and filling his wife's mind with lies and half-truths while he remains silent watching to see what she will do. Then, when he has failed in his duty to defend her, debunk Satan's lies, and lead her back to the truth, he follows her lead into sin. There's no question that he was the one at fault.

The incident reminds me of the time when Moses went up onto Mount Sinai to receive the tablets of stone from the Lord. He leaves his brother, Aaron, who has been his spokesman all along, in charge. Now, the people have already heard the Ten Commandments. They know that they're not supposed to make idols and worship them. Aaron, above all, knows it. But after a while the people get antsy. They're tired of waiting for Moses to come back down the mountain. And so, they come to Aaron and say, "Hey, we haven't heard from that Moses guy for a while. We're not even sure what happened to him. So, since you're in charge, why don't you make us a real god of gold to worship?" Now, at this point Aaron is supposed to say, "What? Are you out of your minds? The Lord said that we're not to do that. Don't even entertain the thought. Just chill out, wait for Moses to come back, and forget all this nonsense about making a god." And if he had said that, that probably would have been the end of it. But is that what he does? No. Instead he plays along. He says, "Sure, hand over your gold and I'll whip an idol up for you." And he does. Without going into all the details, when whole incident is over, three thousand people are dead. Dead, judged, and probably condemned for all eternity largely because of the sin of one man.

It's really amazing the amount of spiritual damage one man can do. I mean, just think about the many false prophets and teachers who have led people astray by giving them what they want, or by telling them what they'd like to hear, or by proclaiming the wild thoughts of their corrupt imaginations rather than what the Lord God has said. A billion Moslems world wide have been seduced by the lies of one man named Mohammed – and that only includes the ones living now. Who knows how many others have lived and died believing his lies in the thirteen centuries since he spoke them? Some thirty million people across the globe today have been seduced by the lies of our own American false prophet, Joseph Smith, who founded the cult of Mormonism. And they've only been at it for a tenth of the time. How many more will be swept into their trap of deception in the years to come if the Lord tarries? And how many others will be sucked into all those other cults that were born in the mind of just one man – or one woman (I don't want to be accused of sexist here)? And how many more souls are lost eternally because of the sin of one parent or maybe two who were raised in the Christian faith and who (at least for a while) truly believed, but then neglected to make any reasonable effort to ensure their children were also raised in the true faith? Any one man or woman's sin can cause all kinds of trouble for others and might cause their eternal destruction.

But, as has been previously stated, it all ultimately goes back to just one man and his failure to defend the one person in his care and to speak to her the simple, straight forward Word of God. Just one man got us into this whole, great big, stinking mess.

And by God's boundless grace and mercy, and in his infinite wisdom, it's just one Man who can get us out of it: God's Son Jesus Christ. This is Paul's whole point in today's Epistle lesson. Just as you were brought under condemnation by someone else's sin, so also are you redeemed, forgiven, and given eternal life through someone else's perfect obedience. And what Paul wants you to see is how God's grace is magnified in this plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. He writes, "*... the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.*" You see what he's saying? He's saying that Adam's sin led to many others sins because we, Adam's offspring, are sinning constantly. So not only are we condemned by being on the wrong team and having the big loser for an ancestor, we're also condemned by our own countless sins and failures. The upshot is that each of us is justly damned by God a billion billion times over. Ah, but now, in Christ Jesus all that damnation is removed. Jesus doesn't just die for Adam's one sin, he dies for all our sins. Or say it another way, when he hangs on the cross, on him is hung the just penalty of every sin against God that has ever been committed. *That's* how much God loves you in his Son. That's how much the one-man Jesus was willing to suffer and surrender to have you back as a member of the church, his bride, which he purchased with his own blood.

The bride he purchased with his holy, innocent blood shed upon the cross, and still cares for and defends today, I might add. You see, Jesus does for us, the church, what Adam failed to do for his wife. We see it, in part, in the way he handles the temptations of the devil in this morning's Gospel lesson. You'll note that each time

Satan suggests something, Jesus counters with, “It is written ...” That’s Jesus’ way of saying, “That’s what *you* say, Satan; and you’re a liar. Now hear what God said.” What we need to understand is that the conversation has been recorded for our benefit. By ensuring that we have it in written form, Jesus speaks to all of us and explains how to counter temptations when we experience them. It’s what Adam should have done for Eve to keep her from falling, and what Jesus does for us for the same reason. Because temptations really haven’t changed that much. The devil knows what works. And if we take the time to analyze his approach in two of today’s lessons, we’ll see that it’s pretty consistent.

It comes down to this: “The Lord isn’t doing a very good job of taking care of you, is he? It wasn’t very nice of him to deprive you of something, was it? You can do better for yourself. Much better. Take the initiative. Have it now. Why wait? You’ll be glad you did. What? Worried about consequences? Relax. They’re not as bad as you think – and that’s only if you get caught, which you won’t. Besides, didn’t he say that he’d always keep you from falling? You’ve got to think about yourself. And how much you want it. You know you do. And how much easier my way is. Why, God’s way is always the hard way, the long way, have you noticed? I’m not so sure he has your best interests at heart.”

Any of that sound familiar? It should: we hear it often enough, don’t we? It’s to counter and overcome that constant chatter that comes at us from a dozen different directions that Jesus speaks to us in the church through his Word. It’s to tell us the truth. It’s to tell us what God has said. It’s to keep us from falling again and again, because he knows the consequences of falling into sin: he paid them. And he knows how much damage can be done to you and to others by that so-called “one little sin” that looks so harmless. It never is.

But that’s only part of the picture. Sure, Jesus speaks to us in the church to keep us from falling into sin; but even more he speaks to us to assure us of his love and forgiveness. It’s us and our good he is concerned about, not himself. He speaks to fill us with the righteousness he achieved for us when he died. He speaks to show us the power of his resurrection, because rising victorious over sin, death, and the grave he raises us up also to a new and better life, and he is even now working on reforming in us his image – to replace in us the image of God and his love that we lost when one man sinned.

That one man and what we inherited from him led to certain death. So let’s renounce him and his ways. Let’s get off his losing team. And let’s strive to hear and to follow in the footsteps of the One Man who gave himself that we may inherit the kingdom in which we will live and reign with him for ever. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!