

Epiphany III Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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If your toaster caught on fire, would you reach for a match?

Then why do people say, and worse why do we ourselves say, “Fight fire with fire”? If someone screams at you, scream louder, if they hit you, hit them harder, if they hurt you, hurt them deeper. Fighting fire with fire only makes things a whole lot hotter and more dangerous. Fighting fire with fire - when we are in that mindset, we have been overcome by evil. But we are called to overcome evil with good.

Now, I know the firefighting experts are just itching to interrupt and point out, that people do fight large-scale fires with fire. Yes they do, the experts with the larger picture. And Paul makes the same point: it belongs to God alone, to fight fire with fire. When we

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try to fight fire with fire, when we seek vengeance ourselves, we are pretending to be God.

Being overcome by evil. It can happen to any of us, and it shows itself in bitterness, despair, anger, self-pity, and meanness. These are the fruits of being overcome by evil. Things, trials, other people's faults, sickness, betrayal - these can all overcome us. So we are seized with the lust for revenge, and we are overcome by evil. Whenever we harbour or seek revenge, we have been overcome by evil, and we give a second victory to our enemies, whoever or whatever they may be.

But we are called to overcome evil with good, to bless those who curse us, to turn the other cheek, to love and feed and care for our enemies. We try to excuse ourselves and say, "That's impossible!" Many people grab hold of the condition Paul states: that you do it "as much as lies in you," and claim it's just not in me. But Paul is saying, as much as it depends on you, at the least in your

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heart, be at peace with everyone, even those who will not be at peace with you.

So that Epistle calls us to show mercy to all, even or rather especially, to our enemies. Our Gospel records the Epiphany, which means the “shining forth” of the merciful character of God in Jesus Christ. Only once we have received his mercy, can we share it. Only once we have been forgiven by him, can we forgive one another. Only once we have been freely loved by him, can we freely love others.

The story of the healing of this leper is a lesson in this free grace. The leper is healed because God reaches out to him in Jesus Christ, because God stretched out his right hand to help him. He is healed by the will of God in Jesus Christ, by that free and saving love, grace and mercy of God. It is nothing but a gift. And the leper knows this. It is not a matter of his earning or deserving it, but simply the will of Christ, to which he appeals. The healing of the

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Centurion's servant, on the other hand, is a lesson in faith. The servant is healed, and Christ's grace is given, according to faith. "As thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee."

The message of these two healing miracles is that all healing, of our minds and hearts, of our souls and bodies, our salvation, is only possible by grace through faith. The Gospel brings before us in those two scenes the twin lessons: of salvation by grace, and salvation through faith. Ephesians 2.8 says: "For by **grace** are ye **saved** through **faith**; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." And notice which comes first, God's grace reaching out to us in Jesus Christ. And this salvation is for all, Jew and Gentile. This salvation is for friend - a Jewish countryman - and foe - a Roman occupier. It saves us from everything, from all sin, for leprosy and palsy stand for all sin, which defiles and cripples men and women. The mercy of God in Jesus Christ reaches out to us, offering cleansing and liberation, forgiveness and freedom. That is the Good

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News. And finally, in the wonderful balance of these two stories, we are taught that we are to seek this grace first for ourselves, like the leper, and also for our neighbours, like the centurion. For having received God's grace for ourselves, we should not neglect to seek it for others.

Now, the high standards of conduct described in our Epistle reading are not possible, until we have heard and received this Gospel. We must first receive and learn love and mercy and forgiveness and kindness from God. We can only begin to feed our enemies, once we know that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We can only begin to overcome evil with good, once we know that Christ's goodness has overcome our evil.

You and I are unclean. The lies and grudges, the bickering and backbiting, the selfishness and self-righteousness, it all leaves its dirty mark. You and I are crippled. We cannot do the good we want, and we cannot get out of the bad habits we hate. We are paralyzed.

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So let the touch of Jesus cleanse you, let his word free you. He says to you and me, who feel so dirty and guilty, “Take heart, your sins are forgiven.” He says to you and me who are so frustrated and tormented by our weakness and inabilities, “Arise and walk in newness of life.” Forgiveness and new life, salvation, is ours by grace through faith.

In our readings today, the leper knows that he is unclean, the centurion has faith in Jesus, and Paul calls us to follow Christ in our lives. Those are the three parts of our conversion as Christians: to repent, believe and follow.

Now, there are many big moments in our lives of conversion. People here may be able to tell of the day they started work on stopping drinking, or the day they decided to start going to Church. There may have been a particular time when we gave ourselves to Christ, accepted him as Lord and Saviour, or another occasion when we felt renewed in the gift of the Holy Spirit, or a time when we felt

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the call to get active in our faith. Times like Baptism, Confirmation and every Holy Communion, these are all moments of conversion - of turning to, and receiving and following, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. But our conversion, our getting straightened out, is a life-long process, and we seek daily to grow in repentance of our sins, faith in Christ, and in our walk with him. So we gather, we come together to Jesus this day, seeking cleansing and healing for ourselves and for others, and for help to show and share the mercy we have come to know and receive in Jesus Christ. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.