

Sermon for Sunday, October 17, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"COURAGE TO BE OURSELVES"

Text: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." II Corinthians 5:16-21

During the years of my ministry, from time to time I have become concerned over individuals or over families who--for some inexplicable reason--cease to be very active in the fellowship of the church. Most of you who are regular have a place where you sit and as I am going to know you, I know where to look to see if you are in church. Sometimes I begin to see a vacant place and I begin to wonder what has happened. Out of experience I have discovered that usually something is going wrong in the life of that family or individual in the terms of the brokenness of human relationship. Something is happening in the life of that person or within the fellowship of that family. And as sin begins to work its way in an individual or a family, he or they feel cut off from the fellowship of the church. They begin to feel that they are bad and there is no place for them, no spot for them, in a holy place such as this with people like us who are good and devout.

Now, on the other hand, hardly a Sunday passes that we do not have visitors of a rather special sort and as I visit later in the homes of these visitors, I discover sometimes that something is wrong, something is amiss, something is out of kilter in their lives. It may be a marriage on the verge of divorce. It may be the breakdown in family relationship and communication. It may be that the father or the husband is on the verge of losing his business or something even more serious. And these people, out of a sense of deep need and desperation, have come to the church seeking help, asking forgiveness, yearning for acceptance, hoping and seeking consolation in a fellowship where they will be loved, accepted, understood. Yet, in a Sunday or two, we see them no more. Somehow they have not found the acceptance they seek and so desperately need.

Now, over the years, these observations have led me to draw two parallel conclusions. The first conclusion is this: sin is a lonely business. Sin tends to cut us off from one another, to break the fellowship we have together. There are two illustrations that come to mind in the experience of the disciples of Jesus. The first one is Judas. In his heart he proposed to do a wicked, sinful thing. For thirty pieces of silver he would betray his Lord into the hands of his enemies, he would become the vehicle, the instrument of the very death of the Son of God. And when this decision for sin was firmly made, when he was committed to this disastrous course of action, the Bible tells us that Judas then broke fellowship with the disciples. His sin cut him off from them and sent him running out into a black, lonely and desolate night from which he was never to recover and that was to eventuate in suicide. The Bible says literally that at the Lord's table there that night after the Lord's Supper was over that Judas "went immediately out: and it was night." You know, that is what sin is like. It drives us from the love and fellowship of those whom we love and care about. And it is always a dark, night-like experience of the human soul. The other example is that of the disciple Peter. He had boasted to Jesus, "Though all men would deny thee, yet would I not deny thee." Yet, in that bitter night when the trial of Jesus was in progress, when his master was being reviled and beaten and mocked, three times--not once, not twice--but three times he denied him. And as the cock crew, the Bible says of him, "And Peter went out and wept bitterly." Yes, sin is a lonely business. It cuts us off from God and it cuts us off from one another.

But there is a second conclusion parallel to the loneliness of sin that I have drawn over the years. That conclusion is this: the pious, devout fellowship of the church does not ordinarily permit a man to be a sinner. Now, I am not saying that we have always done this. There are times when the church has taken a sinner in and loved him back into the very grace of God. But ordinarily we do not permit a man to be a sinner. So, when men are overtaken in sin, they usually withdraw from the fellowship of the church. We don't dare to be sinners. People in desperate spiritual need come but find nothing of what they seek or need because in a sanctuary full of good people they don't dare admit they are bad. We church members are unthinkably horrified when one of our members does some dreadful sin. For example, if a real, sure-enough, honest-to-goodness thief or jail-bird; or a prostitute or a murderer attempted to become a part of our fellowship we would be very, very awkward attempting to relate to that person. What would happen if one of our Elders was apprehended by the law for embezzlement; or what would happen if one of our Deacons was arrested for breaking and entering; or what if one of our young people was jailed for stealing a car? Or what if the wife of one of our prominent members ran off with another man and then decided she wanted to come back? No, our fellowship is based on our goodness; on our moral uprightness. When sin enters the picture, it breaks up, tears up, our fellowship. And, you know, there is really no place for the sinner in the congregation of the righteous! I would simply remind you of what the leaders of the church in Jerusalem wanted to do when they brought the woman taken in adultery to Jesus--they wanted to stone her to death. They had no place for the sinner.

With these thoughts in mind, I'm going to read parts of three verses from our scripture this morning. They have one thought in common. As I read them, see if you can catch with me the thing they have in common. Verse 18 reads, "And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ." The first part of verse 19 says this: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." And the first part of verse 21 reads, "For he hath made him to be sin for us." Now, all of these passages have one thing in common and it is this: God has done and is doing something about sin in you and me.

As I grow older, I get a lot more realistic about life and I get more realistic about myself. I used to think that if I tried a little harder or if I worked a little longer, or prayed a little louder that somehow I could do something about the sin in my life. I don't think that any more. This doesn't mean I have quit trying, but it does mean I have become more grateful to God for what he has already done and He continues to do something about the sin in my life. You see, I now know that if I'm left on my own to deal with my sin, I've had it. As a matter of fact, if you think that just because I'm your pastor that I won't sin, that I won't lose my temper, that I won't have grumpy days, and that I'll always be perfect, you are in for a sad awakening.

Back in 1951 Bertrand Russell had a pretty optimistic view about mankind and he made a radio speech in London. This is what he said: "At last man has emerged from the desert into a smiling land, but in the long night he has forgotten how to smile. We cannot believe in the brightness of the morning. We think it trivial and deceptive; we cling to old myths that allow us to go on living with fear and hate--above all hate of ourselves, miserable sinners." And then he added this; "This is folly. Man needs for his salvation only one thing: to open his heart to joy, and leave fear to gibber through the glimmering darkness of a forgotten past. He must lift up his eyes and say: "No, I am not a miserable sinner; I am a being who, by a long and arduous road, has discovered how to make intelligence master natural

obstacles. I am a being who has discovered how to live life in freedom and joy, at peace with myself, and, therefore, with all mankind."

Well, I think we would all have to say that man has indeed come a long way out of the darkness from those crude, fearful days when we cowered in caves and dressed in skins and bashed one another with stone axes. I think we can agree that man has discovered how to make his intelligence master natural objects. But I do not think we can say, "No, I am not a miserable sinner." We can't say that because we are still bashing one another but with instruments far more deadly than a stone axe. And we live in a time, a century, which has seen more wars and more death than any other century. And least of all can we say that we have learned to live at peace with ourselves and therefore with all mankind. You have to remember only recently our cities burning in smoke and ruin, people marching and shouting, armies invading, fighting and warring--and who can say we have learned to live at peace with ourselves. The reason we can't be at peace with ourselves and one another is because sin is still a very real part of human experience. And this sin is a lonely business that cuts me off from God and cuts me off from you.

But, praise God, the Bible says that God has done and is doing something about sin. Now, this means that I don't have to go on lying to myself or lying to you about me. I don't have to go on pretending to be something I'm not--playing roles, acting out, wearing masks, hiding behind some facade. Once I know God has done something about sin I can dare to be what I really am--a sinner. Let me see if I can give you an illustration that will help you understand this more clearly. Suppose I am at a party that is being given in the back yard and there is a swimming pool here, and I am a non-swimmer. I really am a swimmer but I am a non-swimmer tonight. And I think everybody there is a swimmer and I don't want them to know that I am a non-swimmer and I look at that swimming pool and I edge away but in a minute I turn around and trip and splash--I'm in the pool. Now I don't want everybody watching me to know I'm a non-swimmer so there I am pretending I can swim and all the time I'm drowning. Then someone throws me a life jacket. I can quit pretending because I know I am saved. It doesn't matter whether I can swim or not. I am holding on to that life jacket and I can quit pretending. Thank God for that! God hates my sin. He loathes it. He despises it. It is an abomination to God. But God loves me. I'm loved and accepted not because I'm good or deserving or anything else. but I'm loved because God is love. My liberation from fear and loneliness, my liberation from despair and hopelessness comes not in denying my sin and saying, "Oh, no I'm not a sinner. We are all living together in peace. "Malarkey!" We are sinners and we aren't living together in peace. My liberation comes in the knowledge of the truth about myself (that I can't swim) and the truth about what God has done about it (thrown me a life jacket), and it is that truth that sets me free. I can have the courage to accept myself not because I can swim--because I can't; not because I'm very acceptable, not because I'm lovely or even loveable, not because I'm good, or moral, or upright or fair. I can dare to accept myself as I truly am because God on the cross of Jesus has already accepted me as I am. He has reconciled himself to me. He has thrown me a jacket and saved me.

Yes, the mercy of God smashes into the misery and loneliness of sinners. I can dare to accept myself because Christ accepts me. All pretense and sham and falseness has ended and I can dare to be a real person. A sinner--yes!--but a sinner saved by God's life jacket, saved by the grace and mercy and the forgiveness of God. And then, when that happens to me a strange thing occurs! Because into my life and into my experience there comes something new, the very power of God now invades my life and enables me to live as a new creation, a new person. And there comes

into my experience a thrust of power that enables me to be what I have never been before, a saved sinner who is free to be himself because he knows he is loved and forgiven, a saved non-swimmer because he has a life jacket.

What kind of persons do you want to be this morning? The starting place is at the foot of the cross in acknowledgment of your sinfulness. The fact that, spiritually speaking, you can't swim. We don't like to admit that. A man prefers to hide from himself, from others and even from God by saying, "I'm not a sinner, I'm a pretty good person." We all hate to admit even to ourselves that we are non-swimmers. But the beginning of finding ourselves lies in accepting ourselves and discovering that in the very act of admitting our sins, the mercy of God meets the misery of us sinners and in that meeting, a thrust of power comes that permits us to live new lives

I want to say to you this morning that you no longer need to be lonely and afraid. You don't have to be cut off from your fellow man and from God. God knows who you are this morning. He knows your name--he knows all about you. You can hide nothing from God. And God--who sees sin in your life for what it is and for what it does to you--hates that sin. He despises your sin. He loathes your sin. But He loves you. He throws you a life-line.

And there is another exciting thing that happens to us, too! Once I can accept myself as a sinner saved by the grace and mercy of God, then I can dare to accept you. Isn't that astonishing? True fellowship--genuine fellowship--comes not in a fellowship where everybody has to be good, but it comes when people accept one another for who and what they are, sinners though they be, because they themselves are loved and accepted. To put it another way I can accept you and the fact that you can't swim and need a life-jacket because I know I can't swim either and I'm holding on to a life-jacket too.

Yes, sin is a lonely business. It cuts us off from God and from one another. It destroys the fellowship of holy and devout people who demand goodness and perfection of one another. But I need no longer be lonely because God in Christ forgives my sin; I no longer need be lonely, for to me and to people like me, God has given a fellowship--the fellowship of the undevout, a fellowship of sinners, a fellowship of non-swimmers, a fellowship of fallen saints where sinners can reach out and welcome other sinners into the circle of God's mercy--a mercy that comes to meet man's lonely misery in the reconciling cross of Jesus Christ. Then, I can dare to be what I really am--a sinner who is forgiven, a non-swimmer with a life-jacket. I can dare to love you, even though you, too, are a sinner. And here--in the fellowship of the non-swimmers, in the fellowship of the undevout and the unholy--I am made one with God, one with you, and you with me.

Yes, the mercy of God smashes into the misery and loneliness of sinners. I can dare to accept myself because Christ accepts me. All pretense and sham and dishonesty has ended and I can dare to be a real person. A sinner--yes!--but a sinner saved by God's life jacket, saved by the grace and mercy and the forgiveness of God. And then, when each happens to me a strange thing occurs: because into my life and into my experience there comes something new. The very power of God now lavished on me enables me to live as a new creature, a new person. And there comes