

“God and Pragmatism”

Mark 9:38-50; Numbers 11:4-6, 18-20, 31-33

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2021; September 26, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

Rev. Charles Westby, Pastor

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In our Gospel reading today, Jesus talks in a certain way about the seriousness of sin: “[I]f your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’” (Mark 9:43-48).

This is pretty stark talk coming from Jesus. I think that the first question it prompts is does Jesus mean all of this literally. Does He really want us to mutilate ourselves when we sin? If not, then what is He getting at?

Jesus is not being literal. Chopping off the hand, etc., would not actually stop us from sinning because it would not stop the corrupted heart from sinning. Jesus is speaking in a form of speech that we could call hyperbole or exaggeration. He is talking like this to point out the seriousness of sin. He does this because human beings can be carefree and nonchalant about it. “Oh, it’s no big deal,” humans can be prone to say.

Jesus impresses upon us that God despises sin and He wants us to think of it likewise. He wants us to call sin what it is and treat it accordingly in our own lives. Treating it accordingly means despising it and turning away from it, and seeking forgiveness for it, relying on the goodness of God.

But why would people be inclined not to take sin seriously? Part of the answer to that is that it is just the nature of the sinful nature not to take sin seriously. If the sinful nature took sin seriously, it would be condemning itself. Another part of the answer can involve viewpoints that are actually held and taught by people. One of those viewpoints is pragmatism. This is a huge issue for us in America. Let’s talk about this a little.

Pragmatism is a philosophy about how to affirm what is true and right. William James was one of the founders of pragmatism. He was an important American philosopher around the turn of the twentieth century. He died in 1910. His legacy is strong in America today.

Regarding truth, Williams James said this: “An idea is ‘true’ so long as [we] believe it is profitable to our lives.” What is true will have profitable results. What he did not say was that an idea is true if it corresponds to the facts. He also said that the ‘true’ is only the expedient in ... our thinking.” In other words, truth is what is expedient. And then when it comes to theology and faith in God, he said this: “If the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true.” If God or a teaching about God or related to Christianity works to our satisfaction, then God or it is true. If not, then it is false, and can be disregarded.

Unfortunately, James set up a standard of truth, which is really no standard at all, like this. To determine what is true you look at outcomes, effects. If there are good outcomes to our satisfaction, then it is true, whether we are talking about something involving morality, doctrine, principle, or just matters of fact. If the outcome or effect is bad, not what one wanted, then any of those things would not be considered true and right.

This is no standard of truth because James has already rejected any fixed or pre-existing standards. And one only determines whether something is true after the outcome or effect

happens. Or a person only thinks of truth in terms of the good outcomes one wants and then does anything, irrespective of any standard, to get it.

And here is the thing. What is true and right really then boils down to what a person or society or a group of people in society say is true and right and what they want. The only way in James's way of thinking to determine whether the outcome is good or bad is just according to a person's own judgment. There is no true and right then, only what is expedient for one's own purposes, only what makes one feel good, only what is the will of the majority, only what is fun and entertaining, only what a faction says. In this way of thinking any teaching, doctrine, decision, and course of conduct can be justified. All one has to do to justify it is say that the outcomes will be to one's satisfaction. Hitler's decision to invade Czechoslovakia was good because the German nation needed "living space." Abortion is good because it relieves the mother of having to cope with raising a child she did not want to have to raise.

I submit to you that this way of thinking is extensive throughout our culture.

It was also a way of thinking that the people of Israel had a problem with. In the Old Testament reading from Numbers 11, the people of Israel were craving meat. God had given them manna to eat. But they were getting sick of manna. They wanted meat. So they complained to high heaven (Numbers 11:4).

Here is what they said: "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic" (Numbers 11:5 ESV). Apparently, they wanted more than just meat. Ah yes, they were saying, "We remember how good it was for us in Egypt." But they conveniently forgot that they were slaves in Egypt, and that the Egyptian authorities were driving them hard.

But look at how they judge the situation. We can do so by asking this question: was it true and right and good that God should have delivered them from slavery in Egypt? And then we can do so by making this assertion: it is good to be free from slavery in Egypt. Liberty is good.

Now apply the way of understanding what is true and right that pragmatism teaches. Look at the outcomes. They don't have meat to eat. So maybe the people of Israel thought this way: "Life is difficult, challenging, and somewhat hard out here in the wilderness on our way to the promised land. And wow did God show us something when He took care of the Egyptians. We don't have everything we want, but we are free, and God has claimed us as His own."

Wait a second, that is not what they said. Here is what they said. "We don't have meat, and cucumbers, and melons, and leeks, and onions, and garlic to eat. This outcome is really bad. Our cravings and desires are not being satisfied." Conclusion: God was wrong to have delivered us from slavery in Egypt. Conclusion: It is better to be a slave and not free, than to be free and have liberty with these results.

What did God think about such reasoning? It says this in Numbers 11 which is not part of the Old Testament reading today—and this is not pretty: "Then a wind from the LORD sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, around the camp, .... And the people rose all that day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers. And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck down the people with a very great plague" (Numbers 11:31-33 ESV). God does not think very highly of determining what is true by outcomes.

Pragmatism is not a good philosophy for many reasons. Some of the most important reasons are that it provides no basis in thought, understanding, and faith to cope with difficulties

in life. It leads to despair when the outcomes are not what we want, and then when outcomes are objectively hard. It provides no basis for believing that God is good and faithful when times are hard and that God's purposes will ultimately prevail. In this sense, pragmatism is cruel because it can only judge what is true by outcomes satisfactory to our own desires. And when those outcomes do not come, it provides no theoretical way or way of faith to cope. It robs one of any faith in God's goodness no matter what.

Pragmatism also provides no teaching to guide you as to how you should live. It does not provide a way for you to stay out of trouble, either with God or with human authorities. It leaves you only to the whims and faulty judgments and wayward desires of the sinful nature. It leaves you with a way of determining what is true and right that boils down to what you can get away with. Or it leaves you only vulnerable to the ways that other people can try to use you to satisfy their own ends or desires.

It also leaves you no basis in thought and in character for suffering for doing what is right; for pursuing the facts when others just want to cover up the facts.

Where do we get the mindset and the faith and strength to counteract pragmatism? We get it from Jesus. Just think what Jesus would have done, and not done, if He had judged His mission on the basis of pragmatism. The one thing He surely would have avoided was the cross. But if He had avoided the cross, He would have turned away from the Father because He would have given up being faithful to the truth. He would have made outcomes in this life more important than the Father's will. But then He would have failed in providing for us the redemption we need from sin. He would then also have not been able to create in us a clean heart and renew us to love God and the truth.

Thanks be to God that Jesus did not think like William James. And so He has redeemed us from sin. He has raised up in newness of life, that loves God and God's ways just because they are God and true and right. And He lives in us by the Spirit to urge us to live in that way. This is true for you as you have been baptized into Christ, baptized into His death and raised in newness of life (Romans 6:4). May the Spirit of Christ strengthen us in the newness of life always, even as God has mercy on us on account of Jesus. Amen.