

Homily
6OrdA.2.17
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St. Bernard Church
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The Two Trees in the Garden

Today's reading addresses the most important question for any human being.

It's the question faced by Adam and Eve. It's the question faced by you and me. Every day. Several times a day.

The question is "Who's in charge?" To put it in Biblical terms, back to Adam and Eve, there are two trees in the garden. So which tree are we going to choose?

The first tree in the garden is the tree of life. It's interesting that in Genesis it says that the tree of life is in the middle of the garden. It's at the center of what life is supposed to be all about.

What is the tree of life? It's God's wisdom. In Proverbs 3:18, it says that God's wisdom is a tree of life to those who grasp it. Revelation 2:18 says that to the victor, the Holy Spirit "will give the right to eat from the tree of life that is in the garden of God."

And in Revelation 22:2, an angel shows St. John the tree of life, whose leaves, it says, "will serve as the medicine for the nations."

Sounds good. So what's the problem?

There's another tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God told Adam not to eat from that tree. That tree does not represent God's wisdom. It represents the attempt by human beings to come up with their own understanding of what's right and what's wrong.

There's a description in Deuteronomy 29 of the person who eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This is the person, it says, "who can beguile himself into thinking that he can safely persist in his stubbornness of heart," the person "who will never be pardoned by God."

There is a second problem, and this problem is highlighted in today's readings. In our Second Reading, Saint Paul tells us that "God's wisdom is mysterious. It's hidden." God's wisdom must be revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

That means that there will be times when God's wisdom doesn't make sense to us. It can seem to be beyond our understanding.

Jesus says two things in today's Gospel that I want to emphasize.

First of all, He says that we are to follow the letter of the law, follow the law down to the smallest detail.

But then He adds to that something very important.

Simply following the letter of the law is not enough. Jesus quotes portions of various commandments in the law, but then He says more is required than just external, outward obedience. Obedience, He says, must be grounded on what is in our hearts.

He makes it clear that the Pharisees obey the law in an external way, but their hearts are cold and hard. They are not obeying the law out of love for God and love for their neighbor.

How does this all apply to life for a Catholic in modern America?

I suppose there are some who are following the letter of the law of the Bible and the Church but have a hard heart. I don't see very much of this, though.

What seems to me to be a bigger problem is that most of us are so tempted, especially in our democratic country where there is so much emphasis on freedom and individual rights, for us to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

There is so much encouragement for us to think, "I know the Bible says this. I know the Church teaches that. But I'll make up my own mind on individual issues. I can think for myself."

When it comes down to the question of who's in control, the answer is "I am."

There is an ancient saying in Judaism: "You are only free to choose your master. If you choose yourself, you have chosen slavery. If you choose God as your master, you have chosen freedom."

The first few lines of our first reading today from Sirach say it so well:

"If you choose to keep the commandments, they will save you; if you trust in God, you too shall live; he has set before you fire and water; to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand."

The laws of God are not a burden. If we obey them out of love, they bring us closer to God and to one another. They lead us into a life of authentic freedom.

There are two trees in the garden.

Which do we choose?