



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

An Appeal for Pelagius

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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Our discussion at Wednesday night's Lent Madness gathering was fun and edifying - working exactly as the crazy creators of this competition of saints had intended. We shared around the table why we had voted for who and what we had learned. The pair that we had all voted for just that day provided an opportunity for me to hold forth on one of my favorite topics - the heresy of Pelagianism. You see, David of Wales, a church leader during the 6th century had presided at two church gatherings intent on condemning the ideas of Pelagius - which just meant that I couldn't vote for him! I mean seriously, who could?

Seeing that I have now just plunged you into confusion and possible despairing boredom, let me back into this. You remember last week, I preached about the snake in the garden and Adam and Eve's fateful decision to eat the fruit of knowledge. They exercised some early free will. Their story was interpreted in such a way that it led to the creation of an enduring church doctrine - that of Original Sin and how we are all hopelessly ensnared by it. The apostle Paul got things started in last week's reading from Romans; "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all..." Adam sinned; therefore, we are all sinful. In the 4th century, Bishop Augustine of Hippo expounded on this concept and called it Original Sin. He taught that humankind is fallen and can't get up, and that we need to be rescued from this state. To Augustine, we have no capacity to do good in ourselves.

Enter the Irish monk, Pelagius. While Roman Christianity was developing its ideas and doctrines, there was a whole different outlook in the British Isles. We know that Christianity had been introduced early on, as we have the date of 209 for the first martyr of Britain, St. Alban. The faith developed and flourished. This Celtic Christianity focused on the goodness of creation, in which God is glimpsed. Pelagius said, "The presence of God's spirit in all living things is what makes them beautiful; and if we look with God's eyes, nothing on earth is ugly." He believed that newborn children were pure, coming directly from God, "filled with humanity's essential blessedness." He taught that Adam's sin was his own, not a burden that we all carry. He said, "Every person is endowed with the capacity to know right from wrong, the goodness of the image in which we are made is not lost. This image guides us to become what we are meant to be, sons and daughters of God." Regarding Christ, Pelagius believed that "the gift of the gospel is that we are instructed by the grace of Christ, encouraged and shown the goodness of God that is within us."

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This generous understanding of humanity ran smack into Augustine and other powerful Church figures. Eventually the Celtic ideas were deemed to be heretical and Pelagius was excommunicated. He was characterized as claiming that human will is sufficient for salvation, that we do not need God. What he actually taught was closer to our having the ability to say yes to God, to cooperate with God's grace. I'm not the only one to think that he got a raw deal and that the church is the poorer for it.

Augustine theology of fallen, depraved humanity shaped the church. Pelagius has been cast as a dangerous heretic, when he really was a threat to the controlling theology that gave the church power over the lives of the faithful for a long time.

Let's look at today's story of Abraham through these two lenses. First, let's overcome the idea that Abram got a text from God with instructions and assume that it was more of an inspiration to venture out with confidence that he was being led or guided. We have probably all had a similar experience in which an idea or opportunity came our way. Some we have said yes to, others we have not. At the heart of this is the question of whether we are making such decisions of our own free will? According to Augustine we are not. He ascribed to a sort of predestination - all of our lives are already charted out, whether or not we will say yes or no to things. Any good things that we do are because God caused us to. Without God directing every impulse, we cannot make a decision for good. Pelagius said, not so fast. We are not puppets, we are made in the image of God and therefore have the capacity to discern and decide for ourselves which opportunities we will choose and which we will decline. We are guided by the grace of God's love but we are not coerced by it.

Paul's Letter to the Romans weighs in and asks what was gained by Abraham? Did he do anything on his own? According to Augustine, Abraham played no part in the story. He is a windup toy, set on the game board along with all of the other pieces which just read off a pre-determined script. Followers of Pelagius were horrified by this kind of thinking. "They saw the Augustinian theological system as a threat to grace... as a partnership between God and man." (brojed.org)

When Pelagius first left Britain where he had lived in a monastery, apparently a man of great faith, piety, and integrity and went to Rome, he found a society that was shockingly lacking in morality. His attempts to encourage a different way of being were met with an Augustinian type response - "well, we're just sinful people, can't do anything about it." Pelagius rightly, I believe, said that that is the lazy response, and somehow manages to blame God for our bad behavior. He also believed that following the example of Jesus' life and teachings, while challenging, was not impossible for humankind.

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So, I ask you, what do you think about free will? Are we endowed with the capacity to accept God's freely given love, inspiration and guidance? Can we make decisions for ourselves, follow them where they lead us and take responsibility for them?

I had an Abrahamic experience back in 1992. I was living in Indianapolis; my children had been baptized and raised at St. Alban's. I'd been the first woman Jr. Warden. I knew all about the building so when a freak November tornado crashed through St. Alban's neighborhood, I headed over to the church the next day. The neighborhood was a disaster, a real one. 200 homes were damaged, 50 destroyed. The church had escaped the capricious destruction of the twister. Our rector was there, but was on his way out of town, so suddenly I was the only one there. I had other plans for the day, so I prepared to lock up the church. At that moment, a volunteer fireman from the congregation came up, saw me key in hand and said, "If you lock up the church, there are no working bathrooms in the neighborhood." It was an odd kind of call from God, but that's what it was. I felt it, literally and physically, a shimmer of something ran through me. And in that moment, I had to make a decision. Either I would say "sorry, I have plans" or I would say yes to whatever it was that was coming. I said yes, knowing full well that I was being had, but God did not force me to choose the path that led me to ordination and eventually to Trinity.

They may not come in such dramatic form, but God's invitations are all around us to take part in the transformation of the world, or a life, or a moment. We are called to be listening and to hear these invitations when they come. But know this; God has given you the heart and mind to use. And God is waiting to see what you will do with it.

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