

I suppose that, by now, most everyone knows that it's okay, but when I was growing up, no one in my family was about to take the risk. I'm referring to removing those little white tags that hang down from the bottom of sofas and chairs, or even mattresses. You know, the warning labels strongly stating NEVER TO REMOVE them, under threat of severe penalty. Indeed, there is a legal penalty for removing these tags, and who knows all the punishments people have feared over the years, when they've contemplated disregarding these warnings.

I hope that most of us understand the purpose or intent behind these tags, and we recognize that their warning isn't meant to apply to consumers who have already purchased these items. So, if you've purchased such a piece of furniture, have no doubt that it is just fine to grab hold of those tags and rip them off. But, it is amazing how many people simply can't bring themselves to do this, or who feel guilty when they do. After all, it says quite clearly in large bold letters – DO NOT REMOVE! And therein lies the source of guilt for so many people. They simply don't want their disobedience to be discovered. And so, this morning, we take some time to consider the topic of guilt.

No matter how many times I deny it, some of you this morning may insist that I was led to compose this sermon just for you. Despite my protests that I never single out a particular person, or a particular situation during a sermon, what I say may match your life situation so closely, that you may feel certain that YOU are my primary subject. But in fact, the situation I describe is so common that it applies to lots of people we all know, including ourselves. It's a fact that many people suffer from the scourge of guilt. I don't personally know this, but I've heard that Jewish mothers are especially good at laying guilt trips on those whom they feel need them, but I've also heard that German Lutheran pastors, Roman Catholic priests, and Baptist pastors know how to do it pretty well too.

Traditionally speaking, Presbyterian pastors aren't known for pounding the pulpit and preaching fire-and-brimstone sermons. We haven't found that making people feel guilty, to keep them on the straight-and-narrow, works very well for us. But I would imagine that most of us have known a few people, who we feel have a gift for making others feel guilty; some even have it down to a science. So, WHO is it in your life that knows what to say or do, to illicit feelings of guilt from you? Who makes you feel guilty – nervous - or upset, just by showing up? Who do you know who constantly points out to you, what should have been, but wasn't? Or, who is it who reminds you of the 2 words we tend to dread the most – those words "If only?"

IF ONLY. That's the root and symbol of so much of our regret. If only we had spoken up at the opportune time. If only we had held our tongue, instead of speaking. If only we had reined ourselves in. If only we could start all over again but, this time, do it right. If only we didn't scold ourselves by saying the words, "If only." Guilt is a heavy load, and we're all aware of how much we have disappointed ourselves and others, even disappointing our God. And most perverse of all, even when we can't think of something in particular, we tend to be certain that there must be something about which we should feel guilty.

Consider our gospel lesson this morning. We hear about a man who was blind from birth. According to the medical and theological understanding of that day, this man had done something wrong. He was being punished for his failings in life. And, even if the man himself couldn't think of anything he'd done to deserve this punishment, there must have been something. Or perhaps, it was his parents' shortcomings that were being punished.

That was the prevailing attitude in biblical times, and amazingly, it's an attitude that's still alive today. Are you a person who wonders if a dreaded disease is really a punishment from God? Are there some of us who believe that AIDS is God's penalty for wrongdoing? Belief in divine retribution is alive and well in our world. So, it's no surprise that the Pharisees looked at

this blind man in our lesson and demanded to know WHY he was blind. They wondered exactly what there was in his history, or his parents' history that brought on such a punishment from God.

And yet, Jesus seemed to have very little concern with the cause of this man's malady. Instead of interrogating the man, and taking his medical history, Jesus mixed some clay and some spit, and made a kind of poultice, which healed the man, and allowed him to see again. And so, a very sad story became a very glad story, except that Jesus made the mistake of healing this man on the Sabbath, which was a violation of Jewish law. Is it surprising to you to hear that the Pharisees, who had pressed the issue of this man's guilt, turned their focus to Jesus' disobedience, insisting on knowing by what right he felt he was above the law? Or, are you surprised that they tried to make their Lord and miracle worker feel guilty? He had done something which distressed them, because it showed a disregard for the laws by which they lived.

And so, it didn't matter to them that Jesus' intentions were good, or that the end result of his actions was wonderful. What was more important, to them, was that, in their eyes, he had broken the law. Can you relate to this? Does this situation feel familiar to you? Do you ever have this kind of experience, where it seems like the major focus of some people, with whom you interact, isn't on the numerous things that you've done right; rather, it is on the few things you may have done wrong, at least in their eyes?

And when you get right down to it, have you really done anything truly wrong? I would imagine that if we spent some time reflecting on this, most of us could dredge up some example, or deep dark secret, of something we've been hiding for years. Maybe it would be something about which we are not proud, or even something about which we may be ashamed. Maybe it was a lie we told – or a word spoken, or not spoken, that needed to be. Some days it seems as if our regrets are right there at the front of our brain, on the tip of our tongue, or at the base of our sense of awareness. And facing those memories can make us feel sick at heart.

Now, my point today is not to make you feel bad or, at the other end of the spectrum, to treat your sins or mine as something inconsequential. It does no good to paint happy faces on the walls, and engage in a group hug, as if that could erase all our bad experiences. We can't simply create alibis for our bad behavior or say that none of it really mattered. Those things we regret do matter, as evidenced by the fact that we've long been worried about them and convinced that they mattered.

Few things would please me more than to help set you free from the guilt you may feel in your life. But I must be careful how I encourage you, because if I insist too quickly that you be free of guilt, you might end up feeling guilty about not feeling guilty. It's crazy how our thinking gets convoluted at times!

In reality, for people who truly desire to walk in Jesus' footsteps, our emphasis on sin - wrong-doing – disappointment - and missing the mark has been so strong, and has been emphasized so much, and become so deeply ingrained, that it almost seems like we enjoy wading in the guilt. And so, the good news of God's forgiveness gets slighted. We delight so much in seeing people squirm, and we're so certain that God needs to be appeased through our repentance, that we may become deaf and blind to the good news of God's love and forgiveness. So, maybe we're not all that different from the blind man, in our lesson today.

Certainly, the Bible refers to blindness and darkness almost inter-changeably. If a person can't see – whether it's his eyes or his heart which are blind – they are both ways of describing separation from God. The goodness of God's original creation is thrown out of whack and so, something needs to change. When something is wrong, there is the need for healing. Denying or ignoring this need, doesn't change the need; in fact, it just makes the problem worse.

On one level, we can say that it's all right for us to have a good dose of guilt in our lives, because it forces us to recognize the fault, that lies at the base of our sinfulness. But you and I also need to find a way, to put guilt aside - to experience the forgiveness that God desires for us. So, let me suggest how I believe that can happen for us all, if you promise not to feel guilty, for not being able to respond 100%.

First, it occurs to me that we do not need to feel responsible for everything that happens in this life. You and I are not the cause of every good thing, nor the cause of every bad thing. And really, I think the two must hang together. The familiar saying is, "Variety is the spice of life." I would agree. Just think about it: Don't you believe that we more fully enjoy the beauty and warmth of spring so much more after a harsh winter?

And we aren't the source of everything that happens in life. There are some things that we have caused, but not everything. That's not to say that you and I, should have no regret over the evil things of life. We ought to be able to see the difficulties that exist in our world, and we ought to be able to sense the hurt in each other, even when we've had no direct involvement.

And second, even though we need not feel responsible for every-thing that happens all the time in life, we need to understand that we are responsible for some things, some of the time. Sometimes we are happy for that responsibility, since the result is the betterment of humanity. Surely that's what Jesus felt, when he chose NOT to deny the blind man healing, just because it was the Sabbath. Despite the opposition he faced, Jesus did what he knew needed to be done, and what he knew to be right.

So, why should we feel guilty about saying or doing what we think is right? Of course, our understanding of what is right, must be tempered by justice, and it should always be balanced by scripture, and the judgment of others, lest our own self-interest get in the way. We must not think that everything we do is right, and everything others do is wrong.

Though we have freedom as Christians, we do not have the right to use our freedom against others. Nor do we have the right to do anything we want. Sometimes, our involvement in life has led to pain and degradation and death, of one kind or another, and we must own up to that. But that's not the end of it, for when we admit our responsibility - when we see the hurt we've caused - when we grieve over our own and the world's shortcomings - we can give all of this to God, repent, and ask for forgiveness, assured that it will be granted.

The real problem, though, comes with my third point, which is that even when forgiveness is offered, it isn't always accepted. Some of us may be stewing over things that happened long ago - things that are over and done - things we should have done better or differently long ago but didn't. For some of us, the guilt even comes from beyond the grave. Some of us may distinctly remember the disapproving stare of a formidable person. But, if God loves us enough to forgive us, why is it so hard for us to love and forgive ourselves or others? The cure is fairly simple.

Remember how it was that Jesus healed the man's blindness. He took some clay and some spit, and made mud, and he placed it on the man's eyes, and he saw again. There was no psychiatric evaluation or long-term counseling, not that anything is wrong with either of these. But, in this case, Jesus, in effect, told the man to be healed, and he was. Jesus simply told the man to open his eyes and see. And Jesus tells us to look around our lives, that we might see how things really are - that our blind spots might be illumined to reveal the truth.

One word of warning: We need to beware of Pharisees who think they know more about our lives than we do. The psalmist wrote, "Save me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me. Bring me out of prison, that I may give thanks to your name..." We must beware of people who know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, how our lives should be lived - people who

have never had to walk in our shoes, and therefore really know nothing about us and our struggles.

All we need to do, my friends, is to look to God, and depend on God's strength and wisdom, rather than our own. The words of a familiar hymn this morning, listen to its words: "My faith looks up to thee, Thou Lamb of Calvary, Savior divine: Now hear me while I pray, Take all my guilt away, Oh, let me from this day Be wholly thine."

KNOW that your eyes can be opened TO Christ, and that your eyes can be opened BY Christ. And remember never to keep your eyes closed when they should be open, or never to turn away from healing when it's offered. It's not easy, but we are called to actively seek reconciliation with God and our neighbors, even when those neighbors may be the very ones who insist on holding us responsible for all that is wrong in the world.

We are called to be "children of light." That's not very different from saying that we should do what we think God wants us to do, according to our best understanding of what God's will is. First, we must realize what God has already done in and through us. And then, we are called to respond, out of gratitude for what God has already done, using our lives to honor and serve our God.

You know, it's a little like the way we should deal with those "Do not remove" tags, under penalty of punishment – not the tags on our furniture, but the tags, or memories of guilt, that seem to hang on long past their time of usefulness. We need to get rid of them – to tear them off and throw them away. They're unsightly and they don't apply to us. And, too often, they refer to things long past. And so, it is with guilt.

Try this. In your mind right now, say, "I did what I shouldn't have, and I'm sorry." And then say, "I did what I could, and it's done." And then believe in and live out the forgiveness and reconciliation God wants you to have, and don't keep second-guessing yourself. If you can do this, by claiming God's promise of mercy and forgiveness, then the possibility of freedom is quite real for you. When you've done what you and God think is right - then don't worry about those who see something bad in every bit of good that is done. Instead of the guilt and worry that has weighed you down, think of the love and redemption that comes through the cross of Christ. This makes sense, particularly during Lent, when we focus on the sacrifice Christ made for us. If you don't accept the forgiveness that is offered, then Jesus died in vain. And what a slap in his face that would be!

Though we do linger for a while during this season of Lent, we do not remain here, for we are also Easter people. For a while, we emphasize the passion and death of Jesus, but we must never lose sight of the resurrection of our Lord. Christ's sacrifice and resurrection makes all the difference for us. Maybe we come to the cross today with anxiety, but we can leave with unburdened minds. Maybe we come weighed down by guilt, but we can leave with freedom. Maybe we come feeling separated from others, but we can leave with reconciliation. Maybe we come feeling like we are blind, but we can leave having been healed. In a sense, we all come surrounded by death, but we can leave renewed and experiencing new life. Christ gave himself for us that we might not be burdened and blinded by guilt. Bring your burdens to the cross and leave them there. And rejoice in the healing you will experience, as a result of his sacrifice. Don't pass up this opportunity to unburden yourself, for God wants you to experience abundant life! May it be so for each of us. Amen.