

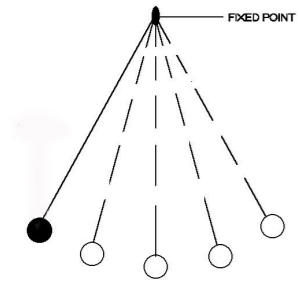
Occasion: Second Sunday in Lent [C]

Date: 02-28-2010

Text: Philippians 4:1

Title: "Stand Firm in the Lord"

Introduction:



A pendulum is a simple device, where the top end is fixed and the bottom is allowed to swing freely. When the pendulum is set in motion, it swings to the right and then to the left, until finally gravity wins out and the bottom becomes motionless in the center.

Sometimes the illustration of the pendulum is used to speak of someone's ideology. He's an extreme leftist, he's of the ultra right, he's a centrist. Depending on your perspective, being on the right, the left or in the center is the best place. For most of us, some views are too far to the right or too far to the left, although very few people always view things from the center.

What is true of one's political ideology also applies to one's spiritual views. In the Christian Church, we use the same terminology of someone who is to the left or liberal, someone who is to the right or conservative or someone who is in the center, or moderate.

If you were asked to describe your political views, your spiritual views, what words would you choose to describe your beliefs?

Setting:

The Scripture Lessons before us illustrate at least two different spiritual perspectives, perspectives that are too far to the left or too far to the right of the centrality of the Law and the Gospel. When it comes to the Christian Faith as revealed in the Scripture, the "fixed point" that is firmly set is the teaching of the Scripture. Our goal as Christians is to remain firmly attached to what God reveals to us in Scripture, swinging neither to the right or to the left, but resting, standing firm upon the Word of God.

Before the death of Moses, Joshua received the Book of the Law from him, that is, the first five books of the Bible that God inspired Moses to write. Concerning the Word of God he had received, God told Joshua:

⁷Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law My servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. - *Joshua 1:7*

As God called Joshua to walk the straight path according to His Word, straying neither to the right or to the left, so he calls us to do the same!

I. STRAYING TO THE LEFT: (Permissiveness)

God called Jeremiah to go to the king of Judah, his officials, the priests and the people of the land because they had strayed far from what God had revealed in His Word. Instead of using God's Law to guide them into living in a faith relationship with God and with their fellow Israelites, the king and the people ignored the Word of God to do what they wanted to do. We would say that they were "permissive" - allowing an "anything goes" mentality.

You want to worship other gods alongside your worship of the LORD, go ahead.
You want to abuse others, cheat others, steal from others for your gain, go ahead.
You want to be sexually promiscuous, go ahead.

God told Jeremiah to go and stand at the door of God's house and declare:

¹This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²"Stand at the gate of the LORD'S house and there proclaim this message:

"Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. ³This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. ⁴Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" ⁵If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. ⁸But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

⁹"Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, ¹⁰and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things? ¹¹Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD. - *Jeremiah 7:1-11*

Straying too far to the left means that you become "permissive" of what God clearly says is wrong, is sin! God's Word directs us in how to live in loving relationship with Him and with others. When we become "permissive" we allow selfishness to prevail, a selfishness that seeks to take from others rather than give to others. Think of those who stray to the left today. Those on the "religious left" who allow abortion for the convenience of the mother, for a woman's right to choose, show no regard for the taking of an innocent life, that of the child. Those on the "religious left" who allow, even encourage, homosexual relationships, show no regard for marriage as the God-ordained relationship for sexual relations between one man and one woman.

Instead, people of a same sex relationship are allowed to use their partner for their own deviant sexual desires. This perverts what God intended only for a man and a woman in marriage. This also perverts what God revealed as the pattern from which human marriage relationships are modeled, that of Christ and the Church. As Christ is the husband of His bride, the Church, so marriage is the relationship of one man, the husband, and one woman, the wife and they are to model their marriage after the relationship of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:21-33).

The apostle addressed those who were "permissive" in the Philippian congregation:

¹⁸For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. - *Philippians 3:18-19*

Sin is a relentless appetite for what is forbidden by God, what is harmful to our souls. There are those, Paul writes, whose "god is their belly", who recklessly pursue their appetites, their corrupt desires under the cloak of grace and God's forgiveness. "*Don't worry about sin, because God will forgive you,*" they say. Jude wrote of such people:

⁴For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. - *Jude 4*

When you turn away from the Word of God, you turn away from the rule of Jesus Christ as your Lord. You become your own law, your own lord, and when your belly, when your corrupt appetite becomes your god, you are doomed to destruction. Permissiveness leads to destruction.

II. STRAYING TO THE RIGHT:

After the people of Judah returned from exile in Babylon, as a people they did not want to stray into "permissiveness" again. A movement grew among the people to be "pure" and to live by the Law of God. Properly done, that would be good, as genuine repentance leads to the fruits of repentance, living by the Law of God. But, when the pendulum swings to far to the right, you end up with legalism, you end up with – the Pharisees! The Pharisees focused on obeying the Law of Moses. They wanted to purify the people of sin. They were rigid in their application of the Law. The problem, though, was that they became "self-righteous". They viewed their obedience to the Law as that which made them acceptable to God. They focused on outwardly obeying God's Law, while ignoring their corrupt desires in their hearts and in their minds. Jesus said of the Pharisees:

⁷You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

⁸"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

⁹They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

¹⁹For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰These are what make a man 'unclean';

- *Matthew 15:7-9, 19-20*

During Holy Week, Jesus said to the Pharisees in Jerusalem:

²⁵"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

²⁶Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

²⁷"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. ²⁸In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. - *Matthew 23:25-28*

The self-righteous have no need for a Savior, and the Pharisees rejected Jesus and were among those calling for His crucifixion. They opposed the love and compassion Jesus showed to tax collectors, prostitutes and to sinners. But Jesus compassion was not permissiveness, but the call to repentance to those caught in sin.

If only the Pharisees would have remembered what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount:

¹⁷"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. - *Matthew 5:17-18*

Jesus came to uphold God's Law and to fulfill God's Law for us. Jesus came to be what we are not, righteous, that He might offer to declare us righteous with His obedience when we renounce our sin and turn to Him in faith.

Conclusion:

The apostle Paul concluded, "**Therefore, ... stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.**" (*Philippians 4:1*). The Truth is, we are sinners. God's Law shows us our sin. God calls us to renounce our sin, NOT embrace it, NOT hold on to it, but to forsake our corrupt desires and our corrupt deeds. Then, in the Gospel, God offers to take away our sin and place it upon Christ, Who has paid for our sin in His sacrificial death. In the Gospel God offers to credit us with the righteous life of Christ. Having renounced sin, having embraced Jesus in faith, we seek to be transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit into the image and likeness of God. In Christ, we are declared holy, blameless, righteous before God, By the work of the Holy Spirit, we are transformed into Christ's image. Here, the Christian stands, neither in permissiveness, nor legalism, but, fixed to the center, joined to Christ, the Christian stands firm upon the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. AMEN