

The Collect for the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Old Testament Lesson Sirach 15:15-20

If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given. For great is the wisdom of the Lord; He is mighty in power and sees everything; His eyes are on those who fear Him, and He knows every human action. He has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and He has not given anyone permission to sin.



Sermon by Rev. Dr. Aloha Smith **St. Augustine of Hippo 354-420 AD**

- Born in Thagaste, a small indigenous Berber town in what is now Algeria in North Africa. His father was a pagan, but his mother, Monica, was Christian.
- Because Augustine was African, in Africa, he did not suffer the same kinds of abuse, that other Black History heroes that we are studying have undergone, but he was poor. Even so, his father, who died early in Augustine's life, had an ambition for him that he would become a great educator.

- But he hated the small town schooling available to him, and was fortunate to have a sponsor who sent him to the large port city of Carthage in coastal Africa, now Tunisia.
- As he said, “I came to Carthage where a cauldron of unholy bones was seething and bubbling all around me. My soul was unhealthy and full of sores that exuded itself forth, itching to be scratched by scraping off the things of the senses.”
- But Augustine advanced quickly and even as a teenager, he was teaching pupils and getting a reputation as a speaker and a scholar. However, he hated the bad atmosphere of the big city.
- This lasted until he got a patron who sent him to Rome, the greatest point of civilization. He took along his mistress and their young son, who they named Adeodatus, a gift of God - but what God! Even if Augustine had wanted to marry her, he could not, because she was of a lower social class, and society forbade it.
- Eventually, he left them both, but not his mother, Monica, who was in prayer for him constantly to become a Christian. He even got on an earlier boat to escape her, but she followed him on the next one.
- But for 9 more years, until he was 28, he was attracted to Gnosticism, which promised secret knowledge to the elect and a higher status of elite, secret wisdom. He read the works of the philosopher, Cicero, and was attracted strongly to his philosophy.
- But finally, Augustine lost interest in the heresies of Arianism (the 4th century teaching of Arius) who taught that Jesus was a made being, that only God the Father was unbegotten and Jesus was merely human. But he remained a Manichean, the teaching of the Persian, Mainly that the forces of Good and Evil are equal, and God is not able to overcome the bad, because God is not all-powerful.
- He had tried a form of monastic living with some of his comrades and friends and found it wanting. Finally, as he was alone and thinking about what to do next, he heard children playing outside the villa and a singsong chant of “tolle lege” [take and read]. Looking about for a book, he saw a Bible and opened it at random to:
Romans 13:13-14 (NRSV) “Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and

drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.”

- After this, Monica’s prayers started paying off. He went to Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, and asked for help in understanding the teachings of Christianity. Surprisingly, Ambrose’s method of teaching started with the Old Testament; the part Augustine had rejected when he first tried to read the Bible. He thought the stories were unintellectual, gross and foolish in comparison to the works of the great scholars he had been reading. And, regarding his licentious lifestyle, he said, “Lord, make me chaste, but not yet!”
- But after 6 months of the catechumenate, 6 months of learning and preparation for his first Holy Communion, 6 months of reading the Old Testament and Prophecy. he found this in himself. “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”
- He was baptized, along with his son, and went back to Africa to found a Christian community, where he remained to the end of his life, writing over 100 books and 500 sermons and letters.
- He lived to see the Sack of Rome in 410 A.D., and the siege of Hippo, the seat of his bishopric, the city which was destroyed before his eyes.
- What to make of all this? Important today as a story of conversion by a very intelligent, educated and desperate man surrounded by chaos in the world around him. Does this sound familiar? This is the plight of humanity today, especially those with learning and good fortune, but guided by pride, without any shred of humility. We know these people.
- But as we know, knowledge itself is not going to make it for us and good fortune can change to terrible fortune by the fall of the dice.
- Augustine’s epiphany was partly in the taking up of the words of Paul with new eyes and the sense that he was never going to make it on his own. An example of this is the doctrine of Original Sin, which many believe Augustine invented.

- Also, in Romans, chapter 5, verse 12, interpretations have been made that because of Adam's sin against God, his disobedience in the Garden of Eden, everybody forever and ever, is doomed to sin. Augustine never had a chance to learn Greek, so this is the translation of that passage that we are left with.
- Therefore, just as through one man, sin entered into the world, and death through sin; so death spread to all men because all sinned. The idea is, we are without hope. As you see your cities fall around you and things are bad all over, this is perhaps logical. But it is not because of Adam's but in the same way as Adam's we are in the same state, but from it we can be redeemed by Christ. Nothing changes, but everything is changed!
- Augustine lived by his five senses, he lived and he saw life by his bodily experiences. He thought he needed wisdom and thinking and judgement. But not necessarily, so.
- Christ found him and followed him to God's true love and joy by using his senses, hearing (when he heard the children calling, "take and read") seeing, smelling, tasting and touching. Some people are like that, even though they are saints. Love knows that and will provide Love with the way we can accept it. We are not doomed!
- Let us close with this great Prayer of Praise where Augustine acknowledges that he has come to God very late after many mistakes. But he understands the Love that is God, by means of his Christ-created five senses and thanks God by means of them.

Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all.

1. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness.
2. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness.
3. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you.
4. I tasted you, and I feel only hunger and thirst for you.
5. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.

St. Augustine of Hippo, Confessions [5 people stand & repeat the numbered passage]

Amen? Amen.