

Rev Dr Nathan John Haydon
 St Peter's Episcopal Church, Ladue
 Sermon
 21 June 2026, Proper 7 Year A

Collect of the Day

O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Assigned Lectionary Readings: Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 69:8-11, 18-20; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

Sermon

Jean-Théophane Vénard was a French Catholic who was ordained a priest in the nineteenth century. Inspired as a young boy by the life of another French Catholic priest and missionary, Jean-Charles Cornay, who was martyred in China, he sought to follow in those footsteps and discerned a vocation to being a missionary in the same way.

There was significant hostility towards Catholic missionaries at this time in China, Vietnam, and Japan. Vénard arrived in Vietnam to evangelize, but due to an edict by the government, was forced to flee for safety and seek refuge in the mountains of Vietnam, where he continued his work. He was eventually captured, jailed, and sentenced to beheading, but even that did not deter him from sharing the gospel in other ways. He wrote letters to his family, where he anticipated his martyrdom with joy, and in the evenings, he would hear confessions from other imprisoned priests, and sometimes would be allowed outside to walk around, where he could be heard singing hymns and praying the rosary. Singularly focused, he continued to chant psalms and offer thanksgiving to God on the day he was led to his martyrdom. From writings that exist from Vénard, two statements stand out: “The life of every missionary abounds in crosses”; and, “True happiness consists in suffering, and in order to live, we must die.”

This may seem like a bleak, if not sobering way to begin a sermon. And yet, our scriptures for today seemingly do not offer much comfort either. The prophet Jeremiah says “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.” Other translations of that scripture go so far as to interpret the word for “enticed” into the word seduce – “O Lord, you have seduced me, and I was seduced.” Our psalm says, “Surely for your sake have I suffered reproach, and shame has covered my face.” Our reading from Romans has a strong focus on baptism, death, and sin, and in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that he has “not come to bring peace, but a sword,” as well as declaring “whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Challenging scriptures to say the very least; and yet, these may be the very things we need to hear right now.

There are so many different threads to pull on with our readings today, that I am going to just choose one: sin. And I’m focusing on that, because I think understanding sin can help us understand what is going on in these other passages. A cursory search online will reveal just as many ways to define sin as there are people, and it gets confusing trying to sort it all out. Sin is seen as straying from the path of God, the result of succumbing to temptation, or an “offense or transgression against religious, moral, or ethical law.” Our very own catechism in the Prayer Book defines sin as “the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.” All of these definitions have their place and offer a glimpse of what constitutes such a difficult topic, but I don’t think they’re enough to help us. So let me add to this discussion a quote from the novel *Silence* by Shusako Endo, a story about Jesuit missionaries in Japan, not unlike Cornay or Vénard who I mentioned earlier: “Sin... is not what it is usually thought to be; it is not to steal and tell lies. Sin is for one

man to walk brutally over the life of another and to be quite oblivious to the wounds he has left behind.” Now, of course we can brutally walk over the life of another by stealing and telling lies – but there’s more to it, because it is not just about what we do to others, but also what we do to ourselves, when we refuse the inherent dignity we have been given as bearers of God’s image in creation.

Paul says, “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” This illustrates not just patterns of behavior, but a condition, a virus, that has infected the very core of our spirits, the very core of existence, the very core of life. Sin is the sickness that turns our love away from our neighbor and places it within the very center of ourselves, where it just sits, unused, and becomes wasted and depleted until we are emptier than when we began. The French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil says that “every sin is an attempt to fly from emptiness,” so then the cycle begins again, because it makes us crave something that we can’t authentically give ourselves, no matter how much we try. We only know how to love ourselves when we love other people with whole hearts. And this is how we love God.

This means that sin, at its core, is a transgression of the law, but it makes the most sense when we understand the law as the distillation found in the Great Commandment – to love one another as we have been loved. In light of that, Christ says to the disciples that “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.” We can take this as a scare tactic to evangelize, but I believe the intention is different. We acknowledge Christ before others when we refuse to be self-centered, when we refuse to listen to the voice that screams inside of us that we are right, that we matter more than the person we love

the least. That very evil is what dies in the watery grave of baptism; it is an old self that drowns; then in the stillness of the water of life, we are then bound, body and soul, to the cure of the illness of sin; “we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed... For whoever has died is freed from sin.” We may not all be missionaries, but we all bear the vocation of carrying out God’s mission to walk in newness of life, or as Rowan Williams puts it, to participate in the “release from sickness, from death... from isolation, from the demonic and destructive forces that suck human beings down into darkness both inside and out.”

Our passage from Jeremiah begins with sorrow and disillusionment, but ends in praise: “Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.” We have been delivered. We are loved by love itself, and we are alive within life itself. Let no one be the person you love the least; uncover in your life now the resurrection we are destined for. Choose to walk in your new life. Thanks be to God.

AMDG