

In the Gospel lesson this morning, the focus is stated in the very first sentence. “Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.” The whole passage is focused upon the mercy which God has given to us, and that therefore we are required to extend that mercy to all of those around us. This is commanded to us in very distinct admonitions:

- Do not judge or you will be judged by the same standard.
- Do not condemn others or you condemn yourselves.
- Forgive, and you will be forgiven.
- Give and ye shall receive.
- Do not presume to know best or to take up the mantle of leadership for yourself. Doing so likely will lead others to destruction.
- Do not teach or instruct or criticize others' behavior without taking a thorough self-inventory of your own sins and failings. Those who would presume to teach must undertake the disciplines of learning and study, and especially of self-study.

In all of these sayings, Christ calls us to self-examination and to self-discipline, within the framework of God's mercy to us, so that we may grow in Christlikeness, and become holy and godly in our thoughts and actions. Again, all of this is only by the mercy of God.

Of course, this is no easy undertaking, for we battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. Last week we discussed the reality of the spiritual forces aligned against us, who seek our destruction. We must be aware of these beings who will speak lies into our thoughts if we allow them. And of course, our other struggle in this present existence, is against our flesh, our sinful desires and self-centeredness that wars against the renewed spirit of God within us. Of what, then, do we reference through the term, “The World.” First, we may refer to other people who desire to undermine our pursuit of God. Ordering our lives around Christ and the Church implicitly passes judgement on those who have left no place in their lives for God. This causes a division in society between those who acknowledge God as master of creation and therefore of themselves, and those who do not submit to God and who, therefore, justify themselves by bringing down the godly.

But we can understand the term the “world” also in the context of the physical world which along with us is subjected to the curse of sin because of the fall of mankind. In our epistle lesson this morning, St. Paul expounds this idea directly.

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered

from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

First off, let's clarify the term "Creature." By this St. Paul merely signifies the whole of creation personified into a singular entity – almost as if it were a person. The last sentence makes this correspondence plain for it says, "... we know that the whole creation," which is more a term of multiplicity or collection of entities. So we can understand the term creature to be basically synonymous with the term creation.

This type of language sometimes confuses us modern people. We are products of the Enlightenment, which in some respects is good, but in other respects is dehumanizing. How is it good? The Enlightenment was in a large part a movement toward skepticism and analysis. It is also referred to as the Age of Reason. Ancient texts from Greece and Rome were rediscovered and read with new eyes, with critical eyes, for the wisdom which might be contained therein. The same critical analysis also began to be applied to the Biblical texts, particularly to the Latin Vulgate. Erasmus of Rotterdam, a Roman Catholic priest and philosopher, went back to the ancient Greek texts of the New Testament and prepared a new translation from them. This implicitly questioned the authority of the Roman Church, for the Vulgate was the officially sanctioned Biblical text that was to be used. The proof of any given matter previously depended upon citing established authorities, particularly the ancient authorities, but with the Enlightenment, such authorities were no longer unquestioningly accepted. Modern scientific methods were developed, morphing what was previously referred to as natural philosophy, into an (ideally) objective and analytical discipline based on observation, testing, repeatability. Many of these things are very good. Science has made the physical life better. But the skepticism and demand for physical proof alone gutted the physical world of its soul and mystery. Creation became merely an object to manipulate.

As children of the Enlightenment, many generations removed, we are burdened with the misconception that humanity is *not* God's image bearer in the world, tasked with taming the howling wilderness and bringing order and beauty where the previously was none. The modern understanding of human beings is that we are primarily thinking animals. We are beings whose highest utility is our ability to reason. But of course, in the spirit of the skepticism of the Enlightenment and the perpetual division of the human psyche through analysis, we have moved past the modern era into a post-modern era and beyond. In post-modernism, we gave up on the idea of Truth and made all precepts relative. At this point in the Western world, we are saddled with an odd combination of materialism and Marxism.

The materialist only believes in matter and does not believe that there is a spiritual world or,

in extreme versions of materialism, that our thoughts are real. Extreme materialists don't even believe in the idea of a person but rather that we are just complex machines. But then if thoughts and beliefs are not real, then they can't not believe in anything either, I suppose.

On the other hand, the Marxist believes that only power is real and those with the power dictate what is true. Of course no one actually lives like this. We just use these absurd ideas to convince other people of lies. We are in the process of enlightening ourselves into oblivion. We have analyzed ourselves into nothingness.

Now the reason to discuss this is so that we better understand the secular world that has shaped us, and so that we can better understand the ancient mind, which, in this case, as Christians, should more accurately reflect our patterns of belief. Before the Enlightenment, the world was charged with meaning. We believed in a spiritual world; Creation was ordered; Creation was infused with the Spirit of God. There were spiritual lessons to be learned in all experiences and in all parts of Creation. All things in this world spoke to humanity of the glory of God. All things were inspired – inspirited if you will – filled with the breath of the Spirit of God. There was meaning in every bit, every atom, of creation. The world was the school of humanity wherein we learned of the mind of God, for the world reflected the beauty, the order, the love, and the vastness, and the incomprehensibility of God. All things were alive. Not that all things were alive like we human beings are, or even like animals and plants are. But all things were spiritual. All things were sacramental – means whereby we receive grace.

So when St. Paul says that the creature waits with groanings and travailings, he is recognizing the anticipation expressed through all of creation. Sin didn't impact only humanity. The ground was cursed along with the animals and the plants. And therefore the ground also yearns, along with all of us, to be renewed, to be set free from the curse. The creature was made subject to sin and yearns to be free just like us. And it will be set free and resurrected, as it were, when we are all resurrected to our renewed existence in the life of the world to come.

The question that we may ask this morning is Why was creation itself cursed through mankind's sin? The obvious reason given in Genesis is so that humanity would not continue in its cursed state. Had Adam been allowed continued access to the Tree of Life, he would have remained physically uncorrupted and therefore separated from God indefinitely. He would have been alive, but never really living, never realizing the goal for which he was created, which was to bring life to a desolate world. Adam and Eve were intended to bring godly rule and order and health and life to the whole world, that the Spirit of God in the

World would be gloriously revealed. But mankind's rebellion would not preclude the revelation of the glory of God in creation. So God would redeem Adam first in spirit and then eventually in body. The corrupted body was required to die so that the renewed body would arise.

Beyond this, however, creation was subjected in order to teach humanity to love. How does this work? Understand that as both we and the world in which we live are fallen, that it is no longer easy or convenient to seek God. We must seek God in struggle. We must pursue God when everything is against us. We must hold on to God when every force in the world is determined to pry at our fingers to loosen our grasp. Is this not what love is? Resolving to be hopeful in the face of hopelessness, persevering through the storm when all of our strength is gone, setting a watch as a dear friend and family member weakens. Love is learned not in times of peace and comfort. True love is learned only when it is hard to love, when it costs us something to love, or when we persist in loving neighbors and strangers even when our love is held in contempt and treated as worthless.

Therefore, creation is subjected to vanity, it groaneth and travaileth, so that we might be instructed in holiness and in the love of God and of man in this world. Matthew Henry, the 17th century Presbyterian minister, puts it this way: "The saints are heirs, though in this world, they are heirs under age (see Gal. iv. 1, 2). Their present state is a state of education and preparation for the inheritance." So the creation was corrupted along with man in order to teach man, so that man would learn godliness. This corruption is not eternal, but only until man has learned his lesson, only until the heir has matured into Christlikeness, thereby receiving the inheritance of eternal glory.

Life in this world is very difficult. We do struggle against a fallen world, a subjected creature. Everything breaks. Everything falls apart. Everything demands our attention. The ground must be weeded, and man must make his living by the sweat of his brow. But, just as the image of God in man is not fully extinguished, the presence of the Spirit hovering over the earth at creation is not fully removed from the world. The vastness of the ocean still speaks to us. The grand vistas from mountaintops still move us. The miracles of life and of death, tell us that even though this world is corrupted, the incorruptible awaits for those who learn their lesson. As heirs, all of these things remind us that there is an inheritance for those who persevere to the end.

It is for this reason that St. Paul uses the words, "groaneth and travaileth." These words connect the subjection of the creature with the birth pangs of a mother in labor. Such pain is not without an end, both in that it is only for a time and that there is a goal that the mother is

suffering to achieve. She is bringing a baby, the product of unity and love, the hope for the future, and as an image bearer, the culmination of creation, into the world. Nothing is more glorious. Nothing is more difficult. Likewise our struggles in the world, our struggles to make sense of the fallenness of life, and our tenacity in holding on to God through it all, are not without an end. Our sojourn in this world is only for a time, and this time in comparison with eternity is but the blink of an eye.

This brings us full circle back to the beginning of the epistle. Zooming out from our day by day experience to see the full picture allows us to say with the Apostle Paul, that we reckon, that we have taken into account all of the factors, and therefore we can see that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. This doesn't mean that these sufferings are not real, but rather that we must fill our imaginations with the glory of the eternal so that we would long for the goal, the end, when the world is recreated, when we are recreated, when all things shall be reordered and made new.

And these ideas are wonderfully captured for us in today's collect. Our task is that, in the midst of the broken and fallen world, we remain connected to the source of our strength, to Jesus Christ who makes all things holy and good. In this we receive the mercy of God, namely that we are able to be in relationship to Christ. And it is the mercy and grace of God that enables us to hold on to Christ in the trials of this present time so that we would reach the goal, so that we would finish the race, so that we would be faithful unto our lives' ends and be received into the ever-loving arms of God.

Let us pray

O GOD, the protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong,
nothing is holy;
Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy;
that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal,
that we finally lose not the things eternal.
Grant this, O heavenly Father, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.