

The collect this morning starts with a peculiar statement: “O God, who declarest thy almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity....” It is peculiar because we don't typically associate the showing mercy with the display of power, and yet the author of this prayer states it to be so. We think of wielding power as actively imposing our wills upon the world – declaring our intentions and then watching as those under our authority make it so. Power in the world is about force and compulsion. No doubt that compulsion and force is a real sort of power, and it is what our mind thinks of when we hear the word. But it is not the power that God wields.

So how does showing mercy reveal power? In interactions between individuals, one party often has a desire of the other party. Who is in charge in such an interchange – the one with the petition or the one with the ability to fulfill the petition? Generally we would think the one of whom the petition is made is the one with the power. They can say yes or no, and also make their own request in return. Thus we can call the interaction “transactional.” I want something from you. What must I do in order to get what I want from you? What am I willing to do in order to get what I want? If I desire something strongly enough, I may be willing to give very much in return.

Take this interaction one step further. What if I have nothing that the person of whom I am making my request, desires? I have no leverage. Nothing I can give or do is of any value to the one I am petitioning. The other person has every right to ignore me, and I am powerless to achieve my desire. Such is the case that humanity finds itself in with relation to God.

Why is this the case? Because God, as the source of everything, is complete in Himself. As individuals, there is nothing we have or can do that God requires or desires. Within the

godhead, there is infinite fellowship and love, and therefore nothing we His creation can do to detract from the being of God. But, being the pinnacle of God's physical creation in the world, we are the objects of His love, and His plans for rebellious humanity will not be thwarted, for such plans flow from the loving nature of God. God intends ultimate good for humanity. And God has initiated this good in Jesus Christ who has redeemed us, saved us, through the sacrificial giving of Himself.

Therefore, it is only by God's will and in His power that humanity is saved. Any other notion is completely false. We don't approach God with any leverage. We can do no favors for God. We can only plead for His mercy to give us what we don't deserve. God has all the power. We have none.

Now this might seem to leave us in a precarious position. Indeed, primitive humans felt that their fate was left in the hands of capricious gods who had power, but not good will, towards them. But the True God is not like that. He is not capricious. He longs to show mercy towards them that desire it of Him, while He opposes the proud and those who set themselves up as worthy on their own merits.

In our lessons today, we are given two instances of God showing mercy to the penitent. In the epistle, St. Paul provides a brief overview of two things. First he recounts the gospel message that he preached unto the Corinthians: "The Gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved...." What is the heart of the gospel message? That Jesus Christ died for our sins, that He was buried, and that He was then raised from the dead on the third day. Now certainly there are many more details that we are glossing over this morning about salvation, particularly in regards to how

Jesus died for our sins.

But the apostle here is summarizing; he does not dwell on these details for now. The mercy of God stands even though we do not comprehend the manner in which it is applied. The point here is that if we believe that Christ's gave His life for us, for our sins, then this fact becomes our life's foundation and saves us. Belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus saves us, compelling us to become baptized into Christ's Body, the Church, through which our salvation is further worked out. It is the power of this mercy that saves the world, and in fact the world cannot be saved by any other means.

Second, St. Paul then continues by recounting the evidence for the resurrection event, which evidence is comprised primarily of first person witnesses, many of whom were themselves put to death for this belief. He concludes his list with, "And last of all he [Christ] was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time." Paul considers his own case to be unique— he was not only chronologically the last one to see Christ, but he did not see Christ prior to the Ascension. Christ was already seated at the right hand of God when Paul was confronted by Jesus while traveling to Damascus to persecute the follower of Jesus who lived there. Jesus revealed Himself in a vision to the most zealous persecutor of the newly formed sect of Christ's followers. Christ struck Paul blind, but in doing so, Paul's eyes were spiritually opened.

Consider the Damascus event. Christ would have been justified in striking down this man who was striking down the first Christians. God had the power to do that. But instead of judgment, Christ gave Saul, as he was then known, mercy. And in this case, the mercy of God was the revelation of the truth of Christ to Saul. Is the mercy of God any different here from

the grace of God? The revelation of the truth about Christ was the grace of God. Not only were Saul's blinded eyes eventually opened, but his heart was enlivened. He fell down not only on the road to Damascus, but also down upon his knees before God Almighty who revealed Himself, the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, to Saul. And Saul became St. Paul. And in St. Paul Christ changed the world. God's power is declared chiefly in showing mercy and pity.

In the Gospel lesson today, we read a story of two men who went up to the temple to pray. The first man was a Pharisee, a lawyer, a student of the law who was excruciatingly diligent to follow every detail of the Mosaic law. He gave tithes of everything. In tithing, a typical person would commonly give a little extra just in case he forgot something. However, I'm sure that this Pharisee (along with the Pharisees to whom Jesus spoke) was very diligent to track every bit of income that he had. The law doesn't specify 9%. It doesn't specify 11%. It says exactly 10% and that is what he gave. And he was as diligent in fasting as he was in tithing. No doubt he attended all of the feast days. I'm sure he never missed morning or evening prayer. I'm sure he prayed multiple hours every day. What was his motivation for such exacting obedience? We receive a clue in the introduction of this parable for Jesus told it to "certain (ones) who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." So the Pharisee in this parable is probably a very direct image of those to whom the parable is spoken. It was bad enough that they believed themselves to be righteous through their own efforts, but beyond that, they had contempt for anyone else who they believed didn't measure up to their level of exactitude.

Of course in the parable we are shown their thoughts more directly. This character of the Pharisee in essence prayed, "Oh God, I thank you that I am so good for I don't do all the

wicked things that others do. For instance, look at that servant of the pagan Romans over there. What is he even doing here? Aren't you so glad that I am so much better than he is?" Perhaps Jesus is caricaturing his listeners. Perhaps they would never say such things out loud, but Jesus could see into the heart; no doubt they had thought such things to themselves. To really believe oneself morally superior to others is wicked, yet all of us will venture there in minor ways at points in our lives. God looks upon the heart, not merely upon the outward actions. Everything not done out of love for God, and therefore out of love for neighbor, will be condemned in the judgment. We are not to compare our behavior to others'. We are wicked enough on our own. We must only compare ourselves to Jesus, and that will reveal to us well enough why we need continually to plead for mercy.

In contrast to this Pharisee, the publican in this parable knew that his actions were worthy of condemnation. Jewish society condemned him, and his heart also condemned him as a result. No details are given about him except that in this parable, that he approached God knowing he had nothing to offer. His obedience was that of a normal person, busy with work in order to provide for family. His life was not organized around the study of scripture or of following every single one of the Laws of Moses all the time. He knew that he had no hope of living up to God's standard. And because of this, he approached God only to beg for God's mercy. "And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner."

This brief parable only provides a sketch of these characters. We can conclude very little. But we do know that God listened to the prayer of the publican. "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." In his self-righteousness, the Pharisee missed

the greater righteousness found in the mercy of God, and remained alienated from God.

Humans cannot approach God on in their own terms. Our supposed good works do not earn points in any moral account. We are bankrupt, owing more than we could ever repay. We cannot justify ourselves in our own “righteous” actions—such actions, such works of righteousness, intended to earn favor with God, have the self as the basis of their motivation. They actually exalt the self over and against the God of mercy. Our motivation must only be the love of God, a desire to obey Him.

But this motivation, the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, is everything. It will change the world—and this is the power of God. The most real, beautiful, and permanent progress in human civilization has been accomplished through the mercy of God, inspiring devotion to him and sacrificial service to humanity. Those who realize the depth of the love of Jesus, who realize we have nothing to offer Him, but only to receive from Him, are the ones who change the world. Christ gave Himself completely to us so that we could give ourselves completely to Him. We thus come to Christ in complete humility knowing He would be fully justified in rejecting us. But He doesn't reject us, whose only plea is, “Christ Jesus died for my sins.” He is the God whose property is always to have mercy, and He always welcomes any who trust in the Lord Jesus into His eternal fellowship.

Yes, God's mercy is God's power. In His transcendent completeness we obviously have no transactional leverage with Him, but yet He is dedicated to us because He made us to be objects of His love. Therefore He determined of His own will to save us. And therefore, Christ died because of the mercy of God. Christ rose because of the mercy of God. And our sins are forgiven and forgotten because of the mercy of God. Now we, having been transformed by the love and mercy and grace of God, may forever give ourselves more fully

to God through our worship and obedience.

All of this is especially communicated to us now as we look toward the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In the Holy Communion, Christ once given is evermore received by us. We do not approach in presumption for we have nothing to bring, and are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under the Lord's table. Approach in humility. Approach with hearts full of thankfulness. And receive this heavenly treasure, the merciful gift of life in Christ.

O GOD, who declarest thy almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity;  
Mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace, that we, running the way of thy  
commandments, may obtain thy gracious promises, and be made partakers of thy  
heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*