

It was a bright and sunny day outside when little Billy came through the rear screen door from playing outside. "Ma, I'm hungry." Billy's mom responded as most moms would, "Well, sit down, and I'll get you a glass of milk and a peanut butter jelly sandwich," and soon after she said this, such victuals were produced and placed in front of little Billy who promptly tucked into the perfectly simple and satisfying lunch. Having successfully transferred the provisions into his belly, little Billy hopped down from the chair, grabbed his cap, and was rushing to the back door to resume his afternoon adventures. That is until he was stopped short by his mom who requested of him, "Billy, take out the trash please." Billy's response is something that we can all easily imagine. "Aww, ma. Do I hafta?" And of course, the mother's answer to this is, "Yes, you haf-ta."

Stories like this makes us smile because we can all relate to such simple and common interactions, and we think, "Oh, that childishness that simply wants to do what it wants, and resents having to do anything it doesn't want." Unfortunately however, this isn't just childishness. This is also adultishness for many of us – perhaps even for some adults here and now. As adults, however, our ways of disguising our selfishness may be more sophisticated; but it is still selfishness nonetheless, asserting our own desires over and above the needs of our neighbors. More especially, we assert our desires against what God would have us do.

It is important for us not to treat such behavior, either that of little Billy or of ourselves, as occurring in a neutral context. Little Billy doesn't exist independently. He was brought into this world through love, he was given a nurturing home in love, and he has been maintained throughout his life by love. Billy's physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual needs are met through the loving gifts of his parents. Creation is a covenantal act. Human beings, as moral agents and imagers of God, are responsible for and to anything that we create, so parents are responsible for the well-being of their children, which charge they lovingly embrace. Their care is merely a lesser picture of the care and nurture and love that God, our ultimate parent, the origin of us and all that is, has for us. Not only, however, is the Creator responsible for the Creature, but the Creature is also responsible to the Creator. A covenant is a two-way street.

Each of us too, like little Billy, was brought into the world through love, we have received

everything that we need for life and salvation through love, and we are maintained moment by moment by love. The immediate cause is our parents, but the ultimate cause is God, and it is in this sense that we are all rightly called children of God. God's love is the context in which we exist. Everything we have is a gift. Yes, we each work, we each exert effort to appropriate the gifts of God, but that does not negate the simple fact that everything is of God. Everything is a gift. Our being, our personhood, the world in which we live, our very atoms are held together by the conscious attention of the Creator of the universe. It is all gift.

Accordingly, this fact, that all is a gift of God, is highlighted for us in this morning's first reading and psalm. The first reading is once again from the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, from the 17th chapter. It begins by recounting all of the gifts with which God endowed man in the creation of the world. God made man from the earth to live in the world for a short time. He gave man strength and, endowed him with His own image. He gave man dominion over beasts and birds. He gave him senses to interact with the world and a mind to integrate all of the sensations and to understand the world. He gave them rationality and morality. And He gave them spiritual eyes to be able to see all of the good things that God had done. Beginning at verse 10 we read:

And they will praise his holy name,
to proclaim the grandeur of his works.

He bestowed knowledge upon them,
and allotted to them the law of life.

He established with them an eternal covenant,
and showed them his judgments.

Their eyes saw his glorious majesty,
and their ears heard the glory of his voice.

And he said to them, "Beware of all unrighteousness."

And he gave commandment to each of them concerning his neighbor.

Their ways are always before him,
they will not be hid from his eyes.

In this reading, a simple message is put forth. "See the works of God and be grateful. Love Him for who He is and do what is right because you love God."

Psalm 104 reinforces a similar theme, God's beauty and His majesty and His gifts to us in creation rightfully produce in us a sense of awe and love. The Psalm begins with, "Praise the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, thou art become exceeding glorious; thou art clothed with majesty and honour." Then one by one, the psalmist recounts the amazing works of God, the gifts of God to humanity, His image-bearers. God created the earth and the seas and has complete dominion over them. He has filled the earth with the animals, fish, fowl, and beast, and every animal declares God's glory and His creativity. And God has set man in the midst of the world, and He provides for both man and beast. "These wait all upon thee, that thou mayest give them meat in due season." All of this naturally leads to acclamations of praise. "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy riches." The psalm ends as follows:

I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live;

I will praise my God while I have my being.

And so shall my words please him:

my joy shall be in the Lord.

As for sinners, they shall be consumed out of the earth,
and the ungodly shall come to an end.

Praise thou the Lord, O my soul.

Praise the Lord.

Now of course, the incredible gifts of God were given to a humanity that could receive them in gratitude, love, and obedience, or rebel against the Creator through self-exaltation and disobedience. And having rebelled, humanity lost its godliness. The mind and rationality of man was darkened by sin so that we forgot God and forgot righteousness. It is in this context that God calls Abraham, who by no means was perfect, but was given enough grace in order to demonstrate obedience to his Creator. He responded to God in faith. And God, therefore, made Abraham the progenitor of redeemed humanity. God made a covenant with Abraham and swore that He would bring this covenant to its full completion. The salvation, the redemption, of humanity was begun in a new gift, a promise in the form of an unbreakable covenant secured by God Himself.

Pivoting now to our epistle and then gospel lessons. It is extremely interesting to note that St. Paul begins the epistle lesson from Galatians by confirming that this covenant was made in Christ, the promised seed of Abraham. Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant and

thus God has fulfilled the promise made. Against this, the Mosaic law was set. Paul's argument here is that the promise, the Abrahamic covenant, is primary. It is the context for the Mosaic covenant in which the law was given and therefore, God's people the Jews, were to be people of the promise. The Law was not given as a new way to be saved. It was given to provide moral direction and to instruct the Jewish people in ethical living. At the same time, it convicted of sin for it was impossible for anyone to perfectly keep the law. The Law was meant to point us to God's grace. It was never meant as a means whereby we could earn our salvation. The Law is our instructor to teach us right from wrong, but the promise – that God saves us by grace through faith and not by works that no man should boast – is the basis for our lives. The Law is not evil unless it is misused, meaning unless we believe that our works earn for us our salvation.

Unfortunately, the Hebrews missed this point entirely. They believed, and largely still do, that our external actions are what brings us close to God. We see this difference of understanding in the conversation recorded for us in the gospel lesson. First let us note that the editors of our lessons curiously included a few sentences prior to the beginning of the interaction between the lawyer and Jesus, which read, “Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see: for I tell you, that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.” Here they are specifically pointing out the Christ is indeed the fulfillment of the promises given to Abraham which were referenced by the epistle. He is the seed of Abraham and the seed of Adam. He is the summation of all of the covenants – The Edenic, Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, and Davidic covenants. These all find their final fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Jesus was the fullness of the gift of God to us in our very presence. It took quite a few years for this reality to sink in to the disciples' comprehension. Those who were not followers of Jesus, like the lawyer in the gospel lesson, likely never grasped who Jesus was.

We know first of all that this lawyer – and by that title, let us not confuse this man with what our modern conception of what a lawyer is, - the lawyer of the story was a student of the Mosaic Law – this lawyer was an adversary of Jesus. The text says, “He tempted Him,” trying to catch Christ in an error to bring an accusation against Him. In this interaction with Christ, we first see the lawyer stating that eternal life is found in the Law by, “... lov(ing) the

Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself." Jesus said that he had answered correctly: "This do and thou shalt live." So far so good.

But then the gospel account states, "But he [the lawyer], willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?" Key for us here is that the lawyer was seeking to justify himself – to make himself feel like he was all set, that he had fulfilled the requirements of the law and therefore had demonstrated enough love of God that he didn't have to concern himself with doing more than he had already done. We humans want to get enough—enough money, enough house, enough friends, enough family, enough ... righteousness—so that we feel like we've made it, like we've arrived. We look for security in these things when we should realize that all of the things of this world will fail. Only in God is there real security, and if we truly love God, we never stop reaching for more of Him.

So what is the attraction of the Law for us? It is so complicated and restrictive, I could never imagine myself trying to live by the Mosaic Law. It was intended to be overwhelming so that we could begin to grasp the holiness of God and fall on our faces before him, but here in this story is a man who feels like he has it down. Humanity is attracted to the Law—this list of do's and don'ts—because we want to check the boxes and be done. We don't want to have to go above and beyond the rules. We want to feel like we are in control. Following the law is a way that we believe will relieve us from further obligations. Check the boxes and be done.

In this lawyer's case, if he can get Jesus to agree with him that he only owes kindness to his intimate neighbors, then he is free from any obligations to the broader world. This lawyer wants Jesus to define precisely, exactly what a neighbor is, thereby limiting the duties he owes. This is exactly the behavior that we get from the priest and the Levite in the parable. They see the beaten and half-dead man on the side of the road, and then rationalizing that they had no obligation to him, they continue on their way, basically thinking to themselves, "That is not my neighbor, and God therefore does not expect me to help him."

There are multiple issues here. First—he is your neighbor. He is a fellow human being. We are all responsible to God to help those who have been injured or who are in need. Second, attempting to justify oneself through following the Law shows a love of self instead of a love

for God. While fixating on the jots and titles of the Laws, such individuals neglect the good God who has given us all that we need. The lawyer represented by the priest and Levite in the parable, had likely studied Psalm 104. Did they not understand that in love, their obligation to God was not comprised of a checklist? Open your eyes and see how amazing God is to us. Then live with gratitude, thanksgiving, and love. Live in generosity. We can certainly imagine the priest and Levite seeing the beaten man and thinking to themselves, "Awww God, do I hafta?" "Yes, you haf-ta."

Though we might think that we have it easier now that we no longer live under the law, we must understand that the Old Testament Law represents the low-bar. In Christ, we now live under the covenant of love and grace, and this covenant demands our all. The Law focuses on the self, seeking to do the very minimum and exalting the self above God. The covenant of promise, however, focuses on God and always asks us to do more. We don't get to hold back any area of our lives from service to God. The promise recognizes the infinite love of God. It recognizes that in Christ we live and move and have our being. And it responds to this love in the only rational way – we lay down our lives in front of the throne of the heavenly grace.

It is natural for us to want to avoid the work to which we are called. Work is difficult by definition. It demands effort and sacrifice. But our efforts, if performed in stinginess, and our sacrifices, if given begrudgingly, do not speak well on our behalf. Such meager attempts at obedience fall far short of true love for God. But thanks be to God, that Christ makes up for our half-heartedness. Faith gives us the courage to always confess our sins, always receive God's forgiveness, and to always get up and continue in our upward journey.

Key to all of this is the love of God for it is the love of God which sets the context for our service. Little Billy, had he understood all that his mom and dad had provided for him and how much they loved him, had he understood that his chores actually taught him to love his parents, could have embraced his mother's request instead of whine about it. We smile knowingly at Billy's response, but we should see that we are no different. All that God asks of us is to also teach us to better love God.

Every week in our offertory, we confess that "All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee." This is the call to us this morning. Let the love of God be shed

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13th Sunday after Trinity

K. Bartel, 7

abroad in your hearts, and then let that love fill you heart, your mind, and your imagination. And may the love of God inspire us to return the gift of God through true and laudable service.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.