

From Psalm 25, beginning at verse 7.

Gracious and righteous is the LORD;

* therefore, will he teach sinners in the way.

Them that are meek shall he guide in judgment;

* and such as are gentle, them shall he learn his way.

All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth,

* unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies.

Everything that we are and have is a gift from God, given to us in divine love. And God is righteous; nothing that He does or gives has a harmful motive or a negative effect. Do we believe this? If we do, it implies that we are willing to follow Him wherever He leads us. And it implies that we are willing to trust Him entirely even when we do not understand what God is doing. It means that we must humble ourselves and follow in meekness and gentleness. It means that we must strive to obey, not just outwardly, but that we must wrestle with our hearts to submit willingly in all things. In this way, He teaches us and brings us into a fullness of life. For in the psalm, are we not the sinners who He teaches? Are we not those who will learn His way and follow into the paths of mercy and truth that He set before us?

This is how all that claim to be lovers of God, followers of God, from the Garden of Eden up until the present time, are to be. But taking a look at our gospel lesson this morning, we see the Pharisees, who were masters of the Law of Moses given in the first books of the Old Testament, missing this point. In fact, the gospel lesson is quite a polemic against the Pharisees. The implication is that they should have known better. They should have followed Jesus in meekness and gentleness, but the sad reality was that they did not pursue these virtues.

Now, let's be honest here. The eyes of many of the Jewish people were opened to the truth about Jesus, that He was the Christ, the Messiah. Many of the common people followed Him. They saw His miracles, they knew His teaching was from God for He spoke with authority, in a way they had never heard before. He spoke of a loving God, a forgiving and merciful God. He spoke of living in repentance and dependence upon God. He spoke of a deeper ethic of obedience that flowed out of a loving heart, and not out of fear and retribution.

But the eyes of the religious leaders were blinded to the truth of Jesus Christ. In their minds, not only was He a charlatan, but He posed a threat to the Jewish people. What if His teachings stirred the people up to rebellion? If the Roman armies were raised, then there would be bloodshed. Of course this reasoning really masked the fact that Jesus Christ was only a threat to the ruling religious class in Israel at the time. He was a threat to their power and prestige. And the Pharisees therefore felt that He had to be stopped either by discrediting Him in the sight of the people, or perhaps by something more drastic.

This was the motive behind the sabbath feast invitation that they extended to Jesus in our gospel lesson. We know this because the text says, "And they watched Him." Christ was at this feast, ostensibly as a guest, but really to be tested and scrutinized. We read,

And, behold, there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy. And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day? And they held their peace.

It seems likely that they had invited this unwell man for the express purpose of seeing what Christ would do. When questioned, they did not answer; they would make no commitment either way. If Christ did not heal the man, then He would be un-compassionate. If Christ did heal the man, then they would accuse Him of breaking the sabbath laws.

It is worthwhile to note that there was, in fact, no law given by God against healing on the sabbath. From where, then, did their prohibition originate? This is a common criticism that the religious leaders of the day levied against Christ. In the book of Exodus we learn that Israel received the Covenant Law at Mt. Sinai through Moses. In Exodus 20, the Ten Commandments are given, and the fourth commandment, that we rehearsed earlier, is to keep holy or honor the sabbath day. In it that shalt do no work.

The Sabbath was to be an intentional reflection of the Created order. God worked six days and then rested on the seventh, the sabbath. This pattern is embedded into the very structure of Creation. We rest because God rested. We live into the pattern established by God Himself. Against this we set the curses given to Adam and Eve as a result of their sin. To Adam God said, "Cursed is the ground for your sake. In toil shall you eat of it all the days of

your life. ... In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground.” Work, the extreme toil of life, given this context, reflects the impact of humanity's sin. We must struggle to feed ourselves, to survive, and this comes from mankind's rebellion against God. Yet there still continues a sabbath rest for the people of God which is codified in the Mosaic Law. In refraining from work on the Sabbath, we incarnate the eternal rest that is promised to the people of God.

The Sabbath Rest from work, therefore, means that God's people should regularly take a break from those activities which we are compelled to do for survival to feed ourselves. Early in man's history, this was connected with great physical effort. For many of us today, the effort is more mental than physical, and our discomfort isn't from working strenuously, it is from sitting at the desk too long. Regardless, honoring the Sabbath should be interpreted first as adopting a commitment to worshiping with God's people – that is that this day is a day of rest and gladness expressed in our worship.

And secondly, we should allow ourselves a respite from the effort and stress associated with making a living. The Sabbath was never intended to be a burdensome requirement, but was a respite *from* the burden of survival. It is a command to be blessed! It does not mean that we must not exert any effort. Some of the most enjoyable things we do – be it playing games or working in the garden or taking a walk – require physical effort. These are not to be banned under the guise of the fourth commandment. Yet the Pharisees had turned the fourth commandment into a general prohibition against any effort. For example, they also condemned the disciples for picking heads of grain as they strolled along through the fields on the Sabbath day.

So we see that in the Gospel reading, the Pharisees had added to the law, and they therefore had destroyed the meaning of the law. It was no longer a genuine rest from the toil of life. It no longer foreshadowed the eternal favor and blessing of God. Rather it became punitive, causing distress and paranoia.

Not only this, but Christ points out that they were hypocritical in their application; they wouldn't hesitate to rescue one of their own high-value animals on the Sabbath: they could rationalize away avoiding such a loss for themselves. But yet they would still refuse to aid or

comfort one of their fellow human beings on the Sabbath. The Sabbath had become a means whereby they could manipulate and criticize their fellow Jews rather than bless them. The “clarifying rules” they had added to God's Law actually revealed their pride, and the banquet parable that Christ then presents to them criticizes their social maneuvering and prideful competitiveness.

This is the core issue. Pride brings attention to the self. It craves attention, making us critical of others while refusing self-examination. Pride takes advantage of others while making excuses why one is not able to give or to work. And pride interprets the actions of others in the worst possible light.

As those who claim Christ as our Savior and Lord, we are to pray for true humility and to discipline ourselves away from all prideful attitudes. After all, is there any valid basis for us to be prideful? What have we done that was not enabled by others? Is there any good thing about us that does not originate in God? We may have talents and skills, resources and wealth, a sound mind and a healthy body. But all of these things ultimately originate from outside of ourselves, they all ultimately from God. Pride convinces us that we are self-existent. But humility recognizes the truth of the matter – that our life and being are gifts from God.

Now this is not to claim that life doesn't require effort, that the Edenic curse is somehow invalidated for the followers of Christ. Life most certainly does require effort— “by the sweat of our brow.” But we don't start from nothing. The Creator God gifts us in various ways so that, through our own efforts and agency, we employ what He has given to make something new and beautiful and unique. In this way, each of us is an artist, and life is the art. We are given the raw materials and are challenged to draw out something of beauty from them.

The prideful person does not create, though, for pride leaves us content with ourselves. The prideful person sees all the problems in the world as caused by someone else, relieving him of the burden of helping others or working for a solution. Contrary to this, the humble person receives the gifts of God, the grace and love of God in gratitude, and is therefore inspired to love in return through working diligently and honestly, through raising good and respectful and productive children, through serving each other in brotherly love. Our job is not to find

ways to criticize others, but rather to take the initiative to understand what needs to be done and then to either do it ourselves or to enable its completion through others. We are to be ministers to each other.

This is what St. Paul commends to the Christians in Ephesus. He begins with, "I ... beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, for-bearing one another in love...."

What is the vocation, the calling, with which we are called? It is to follow Jesus Christ. Following God necessarily presumes that He knows what is best and that we don't. A follower, by definition, is a person who puts the one he follows above himself. If the title, "Christian," means a follower of Christ, then this automatically implies that we put our own ideas aside and take upon ourselves the ideas, the mind, the commands of God as revealed to us in Jesus. As Psalm 25 said, "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies." If we neglect to walk the paths of mercy and truth, if we refuse the path of humility, then we deny in our actions the title that we claim with our words. It makes us hypocrites – saying one thing, but doing the opposite. It turns us into Pharisees for we add to the Law and place manipulative burdens upon those around us.

In the Epistle this morning, St. Paul encourages us to meekness, gentleness, forbearance, and patience. This is no small task. It requires that we not just give lip service to humility, but that we truly become humble. Not that we would be cowardly or weak, but that we would turn our strength to loving service of each other, and thereby to service of Jesus Christ.

Practically what does this mean? Well, I am again struck by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's statement that the first act of service is to listen. Every one of us has a unique personality, and these differences are a gift to our community. The challenge is that in our interactions, we don't just compete with each other to put forward our own ideas, but that we solicit the ideas of others. It may come as a surprise to some of us, but no one here has all the answers. It would serve us to listen, and then to consider what is said. This is a very practical way in which we can improve in displaying humility. Of course, this isn't the extent of learning godly meekness and gentleness, but it is a really good start. It is certainly one that I personally need to refine in my interactions with others.

And because we all will struggle with reflecting these fruits of the Spirit through our actions, St. Paul then appeals to the fact that we all are one in Christ, in God. Thus when we serve each other individually in love and humility, we serve the entire the Body, The Church, and we also show love through obedience to Christ, the Head of the Church. We are one and our service to each other therefore, is required to maintain our unity. As the Apostle puts it, in our conscientious efforts toward humility, we endeavor, “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” He continues:

There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

The side benefit here is that because we are truly united as one body, when we show love and concern for one another, we contribute to our own blessing. In a healthy body, all members are cared for. The overall health of an organism is a blessing to all of the individual members of it. The second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. Here we see that loving your neighbor is loving yourself.

This morning we looked at the self-exaltation and pride of the Pharisees which resulted in criticism and judgment of others. Such attitudes separate us one from another. In contrast to this, humility binds us together because the humble person loves others, he works for the good of his brothers and sisters, and he sees all of this as true service to God. If we receive the blessings of God without endeavoring to serve one another, not only in the big things that come along, but also through the perhaps more challenging small and consistent, daily, things, then we turn our backs from the creative life to which we are called.

God grant us the grace to live in humility and to purge from our souls the pride with which we are naturally burdened. Lord, reveal our prideful behavior to us, and may we be quick to confess it and to repent. Teach us instead to better love our brothers and sisters in Christ, listening to them, encouraging them, and expressing gratitude to them for the service that they render both to the universal Church, and also to this local gathering of His Body. We are grateful to you God that you have called us into your service. Make our inward gratitude

2023-10-01

17th Sunday after Trinity

K. Bartel, 7

manifest itself in love and service to each other.

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