

This morning, I would like to begin by looking at our Gospel lesson. In it we read of a Jewish Noble who traveled from Capernaum to find Jesus, and then to bring Him back to Capernaum for the purpose of healing his son who was at the point of death. To this request, Jesus makes, what seems to us, a fairly harsh reply. As a side note, this is not uncommon with Jesus. A lot of His responses are pretty blunt. There may be many reasons for this, but we should include among them that Christ is making a point that we should not gloss over. He says to the nobleman, "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe." Our natural question is, "What has this to do with healing the son?" Indeed Christ's answer to the man's request seems out of place, but let us continue.

Now since Jesus refused to go back to Capernaum with the man, this nobleman, in a sense, had no option but to believe, if we look at his obedience as belief. Certainly it is at some level. Sometimes we are placed into a situation where we must travel a road that is difficult. We don't ask for it, but difficulties come our way. We take the road, we obey, because we have no choice but to do so. This man begins his way back along the road and for a day, he has no assurance that his son is healed. He has no information. Let us note here, that he is taking this journey, not out of a desire to meet Jesus and to know the Messiah and worship Him in faith. It was entirely motivated by the fear of losing his son. Jesus, in this man's mind, was his last hope, not his first choice.

However, as we get to the end of the reading, we read learn that the son's fever had broken at the time of the day when Jesus commanded the man to return and that his son would live. This nobleman's response? "and himself believed, and his whole house." In this lesson, the man is said to have believed twice. The first time when he obeyed Jesus and returned to his house, the second time when he learned that the son was healed. The first time, his belief was compulsory. The second time it was heartfelt, and he and his entire household became worshipers of Jesus Christ. They believed because of this sign. "Except ye see signs and

wonders, ye will not believe.”

Stepping back for a moment to get the big view of where we are in our Trinitytide sermon series on the seven deadly sins. We are in the final of three cycles, the Unification cycle, and the sin we are revisiting this morning, for the third time now, is this sin of sloth. This is the outward manifestation of a pride that leads to either apathy or fear. Sometimes we may simply not care about God or about others and so we are, by default, placing ourselves in a position of being more important than any one else. In our sloth, we make ourselves out to be God. On the other hand, sometimes we are overly afraid of what others might think if we do not succeed in whatever task is set before us. This is still a prideful impulse for we wish to maintain the appearance of superiority, but it results in a paralysis and withdrawal from other people and from God.

The nobleman in our gospel lesson wasn't slothful physically. He took the initiative and traveled miles in order to find Jesus to help his son, and then he traveled the same distance back again. Yet this effort was not out of devotion to Jesus. It was motivated by fear and desperation. And even when he met with Jesus, he did not take Jesus at His word, he did not have a great conversion experience right there. His belief, his faith, was, in a sense, compelled. If he wanted his son cured, this was the only route that was left open to him. Life forced him into a belief that led to outward obedience and therefore an external faith. It was not yet his own. He wasn't physically slothful, but perhaps we would say that he was spiritually slothful.

This then, is the challenge for us this morning. Each person here has an individual story. We are all on a pilgrimage in which we are trying to find wholeness, fullness, and I'd say that impulse is a search for God. What makes for a good life? What gives life meaning? The answers to these questions are what we want to find out even if we don't verbalize these

questions to ourselves explicitly. As a priest, and more fundamentally, as a Christian, I contend that the answers to those questions must center on Jesus for He is the exact image of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I wonder, however, if we are here merely out of habit, merely from the fact that our parents did a good job in conditioning us to come to church. Or perhaps there is another reason why we are here, instead of the desire to have Jesus, and by having Jesus, to be united to God, both in time and in eternity.

Now if you are here because your parents conditioned you to be here, my first impulse is good job parents! My second impulse is to ask you to examine the state of your faith this morning. In other words, considering our topic today, are we merely being spiritually slothful even though, by our presence here at least, we are believing in a habitual, or perhaps even a compelled way? Again, I would ask that you not misunderstand me. I am exceedingly grateful for each and every person here today. And I don't believe that all of you are here grudgingly. But in our modern, very busy and disconnected lives, we desperately need to continually be connected with Jesus. This begins with our Sunday and feast day Eucharists. In these times of worship, we rehearse and re-enter into the historical fact and event of the resurrection. We receive the bread as if from the very hand of Christ; we receive the cup also from the hand of Christ, and through this sacrament we participate in God.

But these times of corporate worship are the foundation of our spirituality, of the life of Christ in us. St. Paul commands us to pray without ceasing. Are we taking him seriously? Too often I think we just write that off as hyperbole – surely he doesn't mean that I should be praying all the time, right? Yet I would challenge us today, that we should take such instruction more literally than we do. Placing Jesus at the center of your life means always being connected to him, if not continually in the front of our minds, then at the very least, the soundtrack of our life should be full of hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs, of praises to the Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world and who now reigns in glory through us,

his people.

Let us look back at that nobleman for a moment. The illness of the son was actually a gift of mercy to that man, for in the miraculous healing, the man, his son, and his entire household was given life in Jesus. They believed. Of course, the reason that the healing was miraculous is because such a recovery, returning from the point of death back to wholeness of life again, is rare. If this were common, it would not be miraculous. In other words, most illnesses like this result in death. In fact, if the Lord tarries, we all will face death. Death is a result of the sin of Adam and it afflicts us all.

I know that I am addressing people this morning who have suffered greatly, because it is the human condition. Tragedy is ubiquitous to us all. The immediate response to this reality is usually, "O, I wish that it didn't have to be that way." Unfortunately, humanity's natural impulse is to elevate the self. We love to enjoy the gifts of God while ignoring the Giver of those gifts. We are naturally spiritually slothful.

On the other hand, even this term, sloth, implies that we don't have to be so. Instead of slothful, we can be spiritually active and engaged. We can learn to live always in the presence of God. We can be true worshipers of Christ, believing, following, being a disciple of His, even without the signs and wonders. We can be engaged in the spiritual battle.

Our epistle lesson this morning is the famous passage from St. Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, chapter 6, which describes the spiritual battle in which we are called to engage. The Apostle says that it is a battle not against flesh and blood, so we aren't fighting with swords or guns, but we are fighting against spiritual powers that desire to lead us to destruction. To be spiritually mature, we must first recognize that these powers exist and then we must actively oppose them.

We remind ourselves that as Christians, we have already equipped ourselves in some ways: “Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace;” We have Truth, Righteousness, and Peace, because we have Jesus. And then we continually are also actively arming ourselves as well. “taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;”

We won't get into the details here this morning but will commend this passage to your individual study and contemplations this week. Instead, let us note the similarity to the Old Testament lesson which we read from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 59. In it we read a description of the Messiah which was to come, and we believe has come in the person of Jesus Christ. Among humans, there was no person who could bring justice and intercede for humanity.

But the Messiah has come, judging the wicked and lifting up the oppressed. Notice the language at verse 17. “For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, And a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, And was clad with zeal as a cloak.” This language is very similar to the language that St. Paul uses in Ephesians 6, and we should assume that it influences St. Paul's letter for he was a student of the scriptures.

In other words, when we spiritually put on the Armor of God, we are imaging Christ to the world. We are continuing His ministry in the world, spreading the Truth of Christ to every nation starting right here in our own communities and to our own neighbors. Putting on the

A armor of God is putting on Christ. In doing so, we step away from our sloth and become active soldiers for Christ, wielding not the sword that brings death to our enemies, but wielding the love of Christ which brings new life to them.

Finally, our psalm this morning reminds us that this battle ends in victory and glory because God is for us so none can stand against us. It begins:

THE Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? \* the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?

2 When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, \* they stumbled and fell.

3 Though an host of men were laid against me, yet shall not my heart be afraid; \* and though there rose up war against me, yet will I put my trust in him.

God extends justice to the world through us. We should be the bearers of righteousness to all people. There will be both successes and failures for we do have enemies, sometimes people oppose Christ, but evil spiritual forces always do. But know that our efforts, done in loving obedience to Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit living in us, will be eternally fruitful. This is what we should desire. This is our longing and motivation: To be united to Christ every moment of our lives and for all eternity.

4 One thing have I desired of the Lord, which I will require; \* even that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the fair beauty of the Lord, and to visit his temple.

May God grant that we shake off our sloth, and that we arm ourselves in Christ, so that as we persevere in this life, we may come into His beautiful presence at the last.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.