

Today we begin our long trek through the Trinity season. In the previous seasons – from Advent through Pentecost - we follow the earthly life and ministry of Christ. Every year we walk with Him through His earthly ministry for His life is the pattern for us Christians. In the Trinity season, we then endeavor to work out that pattern in our own lives. We think about our vices and sins and about the virtues that we need to adopt in order to drive those sins from our lives. We consider how we might better obey Christ's commands. We consider what disciplines or spiritual exercises we should add to our lives to become more Christlike. Trinitytide, therefore, is about spiritual growth, which fittingly reflects this Summer season.

Now – to think back to February for a moment – to Quinquagesima Sunday, the Sunday right before Ash Wednesday. You might recall the Epistle lesson for that Sunday is 1 Corinthians 13, St. Paul's great tribute to *agape*, to love, to charity. Right before we enter into Lent, we are encouraged by the compilers of the lectionary to consider the motivation behind that season of penance. We do not dwell upon our failings merely to wallow in misery. We do not dwell upon our sin in order to demonstrate to others that our repentance is so very great. We do not compare our disciplines of fasting to others in order to show our superiority. No, Lent isn't about self-advancement per se. It is about love. We enter into Lenten disciplines for the love of God and thus, for the love of others.

Today, we see a similar admonition, again from the epistle lesson, where St. John, in the 4th chapter of his first general epistle, encourages us to, "... love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." In other words, if we determine that our Trinity season is all about self-improvement for the sake of ourselves, then we are likely missing the point. Yes, Trinity is about spiritual growth, but let us not seek this growth independently – in isolation of others. Let us seek to grow in love for the sake of others. Our motivation is a response to God and therefore should be directed towards others. Self-improvement easily devolves into

self-centeredness. As followers of Christ, let us be aware of this tendency and appropriately guard against it.

But, what does this practically mean? How do we actually “love” one another? Of course, having, not so long ago, relived Holy Week and the Easter season, we saw what love really is through Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection. And again, in our epistle lesson, we read this, “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.” Christ’s death and atonement for us, and our subsequent adoption into the family of God, is the basis of our love for each other. Moreover, in loving one another, we should emulate Christ’s sacrificial love – a un-selfconscious giving of ourselves to each other. Yes, this is all fine and good. We’ve, no doubt, heard it before. But still, we are left to consider what this practically means. No one here is being called upon to die for anyone else.

We are, however, as children of God called upon to live for others, first for God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, and second, we must serve one another. God isn’t visible to our eyes. But every person we encounter bears the image of God. Therefore, serve the image of God right before you, not merely the imaginative construct we hold in our minds. Yes, we pray to God; we nurture and strengthen this intangible and spiritual connection, but the development of this relationship to God will stagnate if we do not go beyond the spiritual to minister to the tangible – that is to the person right in front of us. “No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

Now, this epistle lesson from 1 John is set against the gospel lesson of the Rich man (known as Dives in folk ballads) and Lazarus. Here is a very practical example of the failure to love our neighbor. We know this story well enough. Dives refused to help the poor man outside his gate. It seems these two knew each other – Lazarus must have been a common sight to

Dives, perhaps this is why he was so easy to ignore. It also seems that Lazarus had a physical disability – he was laid at the gate and was full of sores which the street dogs licked. He does not appear to be able to fend off the dogs or attend to his sores. So here we have both a person with a true and obvious need, and we also have a person with the means to address this need.

Love demands that we not ignore such needs. This parable of Christ's suggests that such a failure will be judged harshly. The imperative we are given is premised on the love of Christ for us, so we have no excuse to not love our neighbor. We have to address the poor that show up at our door as best we can.

But may I suggest that helping the random needy people that cross our paths isn't the core issue for us this morning. The text implies that Dives knew Lazarus. He knew his need, and he chose to ignore the need of his neighbor when he had the power to provide relief. This is perhaps more condemning to us. It suggests that we are liable to ignore the needs that are right before us as well.

It is very easy for us to get into a mode of seeing ourselves as one who has needs and therefore is relieved from the obligation to address the needs of others. No doubt, we all feel like this in various ways. We all are needy people, and if we let them, these genuine needs create in us a desire for self-preservation based upon fear, based upon scarcity. We withdraw from others, specifically for looking for how we may help others, because of them.

Our epistle lesson, however, does not make an exception for us because of our fears. In fact, this is why verse 18 of 1 John 4 always feels like a gut punch to me. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." Fear tends to paralyze us – we delay helping others because we might need

the money or the time or the ... whatever it might be. Our insecurities indeed torment us.

In contemporary America, we are comparatively rich so lack of food doesn't seem to be a primary fear among us so much as it may be for others. Housing here in California is a challenge for sure. Lack of shelter is a genuine fear for many folks. This is a very tangible need that I hope we can eventually help address – even if in a small way. May God grant us wisdom in meeting this challenge.

More poignant for us, perhaps, are those internal fears with which we all struggle. Do we ever think that we have to hide who we really are inside from our brothers and sisters in Christ? Are we afraid of rejection if people really knew us? Are we judgmental of others and so feel like they will be judgmental of us? Are we afraid of what the future might bring or of making a bad decision? Are we characterized by the modern “FOMO” – the fear of missing out so that we are hesitant to commit to plans because, “what if a better option comes along?” When we think about it, even though we are generally pretty comfortable materially, there are many many fears to which we might subject ourselves.

Notice that I selected the active voice there. We often feel as though fears come upon us as though we had no agency in the matter. Perhaps there are moments of heightened danger when our bodies react involuntarily, but that is not what I am talking about here. If love is a choice, if perfect love casts out fear, then shouldn't we understand that we do have agency regarding fear. We can choose to act in love – love for God and love for our fellow man – or to draw back in fear. As Christians, knowing that Christ saved you and that He is alive and active in guiding your life and providing for your needs, we are required to live in love, to live without fear. God will give us our daily bread. He will take care of us. Therefore, let us choose love over fear.

Allow me to share just one more observation from our passages this morning. It is interesting to note both in the epistle and in the gospel lessons the emphasis on the one who is sent. In the epistle, we read, “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only-begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” Then in the gospel parable we see the rich man asking Abraham to send Lazarus first with a drop of water to provide relief to his torment and then to warn his brothers about the coming judgment. Of course, Abraham responds with the supreme irony, “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.”

Lazarus was not the appropriate one to be sent. Only Christ could be the fitting messenger of the gospel. Only Christ, being fully God and Man, was perfected in love and could enter into the world to heal it by bearing our sins on the cross. Christ rose from the dead and brought the fullness of salvation to the world. He was the Anointed One, the Chosen One, who was sent to bridge the chasm between man and God.

What we must understand is that if we are members of Christ incorporated into the Church through the waters of baptism, then we are His continuing sent ones in this world. His mission continues on through us. He was perfect in love, and we are to be perfected in His love, fearlessly sent into the world to show love to all, yes, but first unto the household of faith. You are sent, you are an agent of love. Go ask your neighbor how you might be able to help him, and you will be surprised at the responses you receive – practical ways in which to fulfill this mandate.

Let us not permit fear to derail the service of love that we owe to each other. Let our love be true, not given out of duty or compulsion, but out of devotion to God and thankfulness to Christ. Yes, let us pursue the virtues and purge the vices from our lives, especially as we

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begin this Trinity season, but let us not do so out of self-advancement, but for the sake of others. Lift them up in this world, and you will surely be rewarded, embraced by the loving arms of Christ in the next.

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