

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYERⁱ
The Sixth Sunday after Trinityⁱⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the First Book of Moses, called Genesis.^{iv}

“And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD. And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

“And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper? And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother’s blood from thy hand; When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me. And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.

“And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twentieth Verse of the fifth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.^v

“... For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca [**RAH-kuh**], shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis said that anyone who *likes* the Sermon on the Mount would like being hit in the face with ball peen hammer. If you thought the whole sermon was simply those opening Beatitudes, then Lewis' remark can't make sense to you. If you have read all three chapters that record this sermon, however, that is Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7, you know exactly what C.S. Lewis meant. Frankly, the Sermon on the Mount is not there for you to *like*, in the emotional sense of liking a thing. If it moves you to fear of God, to an honest evaluation of your own soul, and repentance from all known sin, *then* you understand it.

The Beatitudes, beginning with “*Blessed are the poor in spirit*”, and going on from there, were somewhat repeated by the Lord on another occasion we call the Sermon on the Plain, recorded in the sixth chapter of St. Luke. In that sermon, Jesus patterned His words after the Blessings and Curses of the Law. To understand that, we need to go back to the days of Moses. We find, in the Law of Moses that is, the Torah, these words:

*“And it shall come to pass, when the LORD thy God hath brought thee in unto the land whither thou goest to possess it, that thou shalt put the blessing upon mount Gerizim [**GARE-ih-zimm**], and the curse upon mount Ebal [**EE-bull**]. Are they not on the other side Jordan, by the way where the sun goeth down, in the land of the Canaanites [**KAY-nunn-ights**], which dwell in the champaign [**SHAM-pane**] over against Gilgal [**GILL-gal**], beside the plains of Moreh [**MOE-reh**]? For ye shall pass over Jordan to go in to possess the land which the LORD your God giveth you, and ye shall possess it, and dwell therein.”^{vi}*

*“These shall stand upon mount Gerizim [**GARE-ih-zimm**] to bless the people, when ye are come over Jordan; Simeon, and Levi, and Judah, and Issachar, and Joseph, and Benjamin: And these shall stand upon mount Ebal [**EE-bull**] to curse; Reuben, Gad, and Asher, and Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali.”^{vii}*

The blessings were pronounced on those who would obey God, and the curses on those who would rebel against God. Centuries later, Jesus Christ in his role as the Prophet like unto Moses^{viii} spoke first the Blessings, or Beatitudes. In place of the curses, He spoke words of severe warning, the Woes.

All of that makes sense to me, as one who has studied the Bible seriously for decades. The New Covenant Lawgiver following the pattern, as clearly He does in Luke, is easy to understand. But as I observe the Sermon on the Mount, recorded by St. Matthew, at first it seems to be missing the Woes. The pattern of the Blessings on Mount Gerizim [**GARE-ih-zimm**] and the Curses on Mount Ebal [**EE-bull**],

more perfectly revealed as the Beatitudes and the Woes, does not appear in Matthew, for the Woes are missing—or, are they?

I think it is wise to see the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew as beginning with the Blessings, the Beatitudes, and then the bulk of what remains throughout Chapters 5, 6 and 7 constitute a large text full of the Woes. The Sermon on the Mount stands as a sharp rebuke to sin. It is the most terrifying passage in all of the Bible, the long text in which Jesus Christ tells us of the consequences of unrepentant sin, the penalty that everyone of us deserves, mentioning at times the danger of Hell. In the Sermon on the Mount, furthermore, He makes it clear just how high God's standard of holiness really is, and how utterly helpless we are to meet it. After all, who has never lusted? Who has never been unreasonably angry? Who has never spoken an unkind word? Based on the Sermon on the Mount, I know for a fact that I have earned only one penalty: Eternal damnation, that is, Hell.

Hell, in the original Greek New Testament, is the word *Gehenna* [**geh-HENN-uh**], a simplified form of the Hebrew for the Valley of Ben Hinnom [**ben HINN-numb**]. The Valley of Ben Hinnom [**ben HINN-numb**] was the place where backslidden Israelites had offered their own children to Moloch [**MOE-lahk**] (or Baal [**BAY-ull**]—the same false god). By the time of Jesus it had been for hundreds of years the municipal garbage dump. The fires that never go out, the worm that never dies, or never seems to die because worms are always there eating the garbage, reinforced the image brought on by the name of the place, *Gehenna* [**geh-HENN-uh**], that it was the dump. The warning against the fires of Hell is a warning that unrepentant sinners face being thrown away, burned as trash is burned. It is a warning against the danger of being cast out forever.

And, the opening of today's Second Lesson, taken from this very Sermon on the Mount, makes our hopes sound all the more elusive: "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." And, just in case anyone may begin to measure his own righteousness against that of those very religious, upstanding Orthodox Jewish people called the Pharisees, Jesus crushes our self-confidence: "I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in

danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca [RAH-kuh], shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.” I don’t know about you; but, that alone does it for me. I look back on my life, if not the last week or day, and see no way to hold up my head as more righteous than anybody.

Why would our Lord begin his preaching by utterly devastating us? He has, in this sermon, judged and found us guilty, for His very word has judged each one of us. We are all convicted as sinners. If ever we despised our own Prayer of Humble Access, we can do so no longer. For I know of one man who reacted to the words, “we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table” with an angry protest: “Indeed, we are worthy!” he said. But, when I read the Sermon on the Mount, I know that, as St. Paul said, “in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing,” and that I most certainly am not worthy to gather those crumbs that fall from the Master’s table.

The Sermon on the Mount gives us, however, one ray of hope. Significantly, and crucially, that one ray of hope lies outside of each of us. In fact, that hope is found only in God:

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”^{ix}

How can a commandment to be perfect offer hope? Hasn’t Jesus made it even worse for us? But look closely at this perfection of our Heavenly Father: “Love your enemies”, He says. Why? The answer is, “That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he

maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? ... Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” This perfection he speaks of is the perfection of love, specifically the love we call charity (*caritas* [**KARE-ih-tass**], *agape* [**AH-gah-pay**]).^x Jesus shows us, even while diagnosing to us our mortal illness of Original Sin, and our own helplessness, that God loves even His enemies. Frankly, being the sinners that we are, Jesus means that the Father loves you and me, and does good to us.

Of course, the whole point of Christ’s coming, as we know from the larger picture of His ministry and teaching, and most of all from His death on the Cross and His Resurrection, is the love of God to save those of us who, born in sin, were His enemies from the start. As St. Paul would put it, “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”^{xi} St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans^{xii} lets us know that God has done for us what we never could do for ourselves. We could never attain a level of righteousness that pleases Him but Christ could and did. We have been baptized into Christ, we have died to sin, and entered a new life by being, simply put, “*in Christ.*”

If you had any doubt that baptism is new birth, Paul’s Epistle to the Romans clears that up.^{xiii} Spiritually, your life began when you were raised from the death of sin by new birth in Christ. St. Paul’s words are not metaphorical; he does not speak of baptism making us dead to sin and alive to God in some allegorical way, using poetic license to mean something else. He means this as a spiritual reality, a fact, beyond our comprehension but in our experience. Only through faith can we become aware of the newness of life in Christ.

Some people, after baptism, may resist knowing this new life in Christ, becoming aware of it only after a specific point in time. Others may refuse ever to know it, living as nominal Christians, or walking away completely, but, either way, shutting out the light of Christ. But the *fact* of your new birth in baptism is an objective one; some believe that a later conversion was new birth, because the experience was so real. In fact, what awakened in them was faith, adding a subjective cognizance to the objective fact of having been baptized into Christ.

So we learn two things: 1) Christ has paid in full^{xiv} the price of all human sin, the price of your sin and mine, and 2) God sees us in Christ. The old prayers of the Psalmist come to life for us: “*Behold, O God our shield, and look upon the face of thine anointed*”^{xv} and “*turn not away the face of thine anointed.*”^{xvi} The face of His anointed, that is His Messiah or Christ, is our shield. Because we are in Christ, and because the Father will not turn away the face of His Christ (that is, His anointed one), He accepts us, “*To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.*”^{xvii} We ought to be the objects of wrath, but in Christ, as God has willed in eternity, we are the objects of mercy and love.

At the Bible Study one Wednesday evening, we talked a bit about the baptism of John the Baptist. When John’s baptism to repentance was taking place, sinners repented and were forgiven. But one Man stepped into the water not to lay down His sins, for He had none. He stepped into the River Jordan to pick up the sins of all repentant sinners everywhere, and so, about Him and Him alone, the Father said “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.*”

The Father is not well-pleased with any other human being, for no man was found worthy, in heaven or in earth, to break the seals and open the book, except the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lion who appeared as a Lamb that had been slain.^{xviii} God’s only begotten Son, incarnate as a man, alone pleased the Father, and that Son, alone of all mankind, paid the penalty and full price for the rest of us.

But, to see this takes humility. Our Book of Common Prayer does not flatter us, and does not lie to us. Some people have decided that religion is a self-help program. Be warned; if your idea of the Christian life is some sort of self-improvement program, you are in grave danger of missing the whole point.

Unless and until you see yourself as hopeless without God’s perfection of love and mercy; unless and until you see yourself as unworthy to eat the crumbs that fall from His table, thus rejecting any illusion about some righteousness of your own; unless and until you see that *only* Christ has pleased the Father, and that you have not, this whole

liturgy we call Holy Communion, and the whole message we call the Gospel, is entirely closed to your understanding.

The words of this service of Holy Communion, the *Eucharist*, were written to affirm the truth of the Bible, that each one of us needs that love and mercy of God revealed in Christ, that is extended to us because we are in Christ, because we could not save ourselves. This service was written to give each of us a way to confess and pray that truth, saying it to God with gratitude. Let us then offer *Eucharist*, that is, good thanksgiving, the offering that is sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

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The Rev'd Robert Hart^{xix}
July 11, 2010

ⁱ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” Concerning the Service of the Church, *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Mass on the Sixth Sunday after Trinity, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xxviii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

^{iv} *Genesis* 4:1-16 (KJV).

^v *St. Matthew* 5:20-26 (KJV).

^{vi} *Deuteronomy* 11:29-31 (KJV).

^{vii} *Deuteronomy* 27:12-13 (KJV).

^{viii} *Deuteronomy* 18:15 ff.

^{ix} *St. Matthew* 5:44-48 (KJV).

^x *I Corinthians* 13.

^{xi} *Romans* 5:8 (KJV).

^{xii} *Romans* 6:3-11.

^{xiii} *Romans* 6:3-11.

^{xiv} *St. John* 19:30 τελέω.

^{xv} *Psalms* 84:9.

^{xvi} *Psalms* 132:10.

^{xvii} *Ephesians* 1:6.

^{xviii} *Revelations* 5.

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