

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Ninth Sunday After Trinity

Lessons: ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the eleventh Chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon.ⁱⁱ

“. . . For thou canst shew thy great strength at all times when thou wilt; and who may withstand the power of thine arm? For the whole world before thee is as a little grain of the balance, yea, as a drop of the morning dew that falleth down upon the earth. But thou hast mercy upon all; for thou canst do all things, and winkest at the sins of men, because they should amend. For thou lovest all the things that are, and abhorrest nothing which thou hast made: for never wouldest thou have made any thing, if thou hadst hated it. And how could any thing have endured, if it had not been thy will? or been preserved, if not called by thee? But thou sparest all: for they are thine, O Lord, thou lover of souls. For thine incorruptible Spirit is in all things. Therefore chastenest thou them by little and little that offend, and warnest them by putting them in remembrance wherein they have offended, that leaving their wickedness they may believe on thee, O Lord.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Jesus went unto the mount of Olives. And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them. And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned:^{iv} but what sayest thou? This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not. So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw

none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “For thou lovest all the things that are, and abhorrest nothing which thou hast made: for never wouldest thou have made any thing, if thou hadst hated it.”^v In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction and Theme:

Today’s First Lesson is all about love. First, it reminds us of the possibility of what today we sometimes call “tough love” – the love of the parent who says to a child, “I love you too much to let you do that.” Then it reminds us of the possibility – indeed, the certainty – of a parent’s loving forgiveness of a child who has strayed.

But we must always remember that “love” is not the same thing as “license”.

Development:

1. God is all-powerful and so has no need to put up with our constant acts of disobedience of Him, that is, with our sins.

Today’s First Lesson begins with the frank acknowledgement that God is sovereign over all the created order:

“... For thou canst shew thy great strength at all times when thou wilt; and who may withstand the power of thine arm? For the whole world before thee is as a little grain of the balance, yea, as a drop of the morning dew that falleth down upon the earth.”^{vi}

However, sin, or direct disobedience toward God, constitutes a rejection or denial of that sovereignty of God. Thus it separates the sinner from God in the

same way that a criminal, who breaks the rules of civilized society, separates himself from that society. Among the most important of the rules God has laid down for us are the ones we call “The Ten Commandments”, one of which very clearly states “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”^{vii}

The people of God are a Covenant community and rebellious behavior – that is, disobedience to God, such as by the commission of adultery – amounts to a rejection of the Covenant. Therefore, the only way for that community to signify that it does not condone, and therefore participate in, that rebellion is for it to remove the disobedient members from among it. Thus arose the situation with which Our Lord was confronted in today’s Second Lesson:

“[T]he scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned....”^{viii}

The proposal to stone the adulteress was, at bottom, the Jewish people’s way of showing God that they did not tolerate sinful conduct in their midst, that is, that the improper and disobedient conduct of one Jewess did not mean that they had all condoned that conduct and so abandoned the Covenant.

Incidentally, this aspect of morality is routinely and conveniently ignored in current political and social debates, where we are told that people’s personal behavior is just that, a private matter, and not something with which the community should be concerned. The Christian view, on the other hand, is that the morality or immorality of individuals’ behavior has implications for the entire community.

2. Despite His power, God loves us and does not wish to exercise against us His awe-inspiring power to punish or even extinguish us.

Today’s First Lesson reminds us that the God who made us loves us and, in fact, would not have made us except for that love:

“[T]hou lovest all the things that are, and abhorrest nothing which thou hast made: for never wouldest thou have made any thing, if thou hadst hated it. And how could any thing have endured, if it had not been thy will?”^{ix}

Precisely because of that love that He has for us, God would much prefer to correct us, that is, to guide us to amend our ways, rather than to punish us. As the same Lesson says:

“But thou hast mercy upon all; for thou canst do all things, and winkest at the sins of men, because they should amend.... [T]hou sparest all: for they are thine, O Lord, thou lover of souls.”^x

3. God has had mercy on us and so has given us the gift – or grace – of His forgiveness for our disobedience, that is, of a “cure” for our sins.

Sins are serious matters, and unattended to can create a permanent rupture between us and the God Who loves us. But if we are willing to attend to them, then as the First Lesson tells us, He “hast mercy upon all; for [He] canst do all things, and winkest at the sins of men, because they should amend.”^{xi}

God works always to bring us to awareness of this need to amend those of our ways that flout His laws. As the First Lesson put it, “Therefore chastenest thou them by little and little that offend, and warnest them by putting them in remembrance wherein they have offended, that leaving their wickedness they may believe on thee, O Lord.”^{xii}

This “chastening”, or corrective discipline, is what Our Lord was doing in today’s Second Lesson, when He told the woman taken in adultery that she was not condemned – that is, in this context, was not damned to Hell for her transgression -- and so, by implication, she was forgiven.

4. God’s forgiveness for our breaking His rules is *not* the same thing as His abolishing those rules or denying that they have no force or content.

Today, many around us claim that the old rules no longer apply to us, no longer limit our freedom of action. Instead, these people suggest, we can do anything we are tempted to do because God is neither watching what we do nor is concerned about our personal behavior.

Sometimes, of course, those who make these claims do so on the basis that there is no God. Anyone who can make such a claim is clearly no Christian, so we can easily disregard his arguments. They are simply meaningless to people of faith. More subtly, therefore, some who claim the old rules are no longer valid do so

because, they tell us, those rules never did apply to us in the ways we always thought they did.

In this category, for example, are those who claim the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, that we always thought was a denunciation of homosexual behavior, is really not about homosexuality *per se*. Instead, they say, it is an illustration of the evils of inhospitability, of violation of the ancient Near Eastern code of cherishing the visitor. In this view, the Sodomites' awful sin was not their homosexual lifestyle but their attempted kidnapping and rape of God's angels who were Lot's guests, not their disorderly daily behavior but their threatened assault on protected sojourners.

Of course, that attempted reinterpretation of the story ignores the fact that, prior to the arrival of God's angels to warn Lot of what was coming, God had already made His decision to punish the Sodomites for their routine daily behavior. Otherwise, He would never have sent those angels in the first place! It also ignores what, for some three thousand years, every Jew and every Christian has understood that account to mean, as well as what St. Paul expressly stated regarding same-sex activity.

So it is important for us to note that, when Jesus refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery, He did not condone her behavior. Nor did He indicate in any way that the Commandment against adultery was not still in full force and effect. Instead, all He did was to mitigate the woman's punishment for her offence – what was, presumably, a first offence at that.

And in doing so, He acknowledged fully the authority of that Commandment, for he told her that she was to go and sin no more.^{xiii} Had He done what so many of today's revisionists wish He had done, He would not have told her to go and obey the rule in future, He would have told her to go and that there was no longer any rule to obey. Telling her to eschew future sins was an express reminder that the concept of sin was, and is, still valid and binding on her, and our, behaviour.

Conclusion:

So today's Lessons tell us that God is sovereign, out of that sovereignty He has laid down certain rules for our guidance, that breach of those rules is serious and can lead to our separation from His people, but that out of His love for us, He tempers His enforcement of those rules with mercy.

Nowhere, however does He tell us that there are no rules or that those rules do not apply to us.

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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxx (PECUSA 1928/1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Wisdom 11: 21--12: 2 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. John 8: 1-11 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Leviticus 20: 10; Deuteronomy 22: 22.*

^v *Wisdom 11: 24 (KJV).*

^{vi} *Wisdom 11: 21- (KJV).*

^{vii} *Exodus 20: 14.*

^{viii} *St. John 8: 3-5a (KJV), referring to Leviticus 20: 10; Deuteronomy 22: 22.*

^{ix} *Wisdom 11: 24-25a (KJV).*

^x *Wisdom 11: 23 & 26 (KJV).*

^{xi} *Wisdom 11: 23 (KJV).*

^{xii} *Wisdom 12: 2 (KJV).*

^{xiii} *St. John 8: 11 (KJV).*

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