

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
Septuagesima Sunday¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Book of Joshua.³

“Now after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord it came to pass, that the Lord spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ minister, saying, Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon even unto the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and unto the great sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your coast. There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I sware unto their fathers to give them. Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest. This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the twentieth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁵

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the market-place, and said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “For many be called, but few chosen.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Again we hear these same words, “For many are called, but few chosen” at the end of our Second Lesson. But what we should pay attention to more, is the parable leading up to this common phrase Christ used when speaking these parables. In paying close attention to the lines of the story, we can negate a lot of false notions that arise from the religious establishments of our day. And this also ties in, very well, with what Paul writes to the Corinthians concerning running the race well, and the crown we are seeking at the finish line.

Jesus is giving a great truth here concerning the law, the nature, and the provision set forth within a covenantal relationship we have with the Father. And if we labor and toil according to his created purpose and will that He has established, and place our trust in Him that His provisions are sufficient enough, all will be well. The crown we receive at the end of the race is exactly what we have expected, as children of the covenant. But there are those whom the lord of the vineyard has called, who will not trust in the covenant provisions He laid down and who will follow and trust their own understanding instead. In the end, they will require more from God than what He has already established.

These ideas were not new to the people to whom Jesus was speaking. The break in covenantal belief structures existed even in the midst of the Jews. We see that break repeatedly in

Scripture with the presence of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Pharisaical Judaism was the strictest observer of the law, to both the oral and written Torah. It was the most accurate according to Josephus, the great Jewish Historian, who in fact was himself a Pharisee. The Sadducees, however, were those who were somewhat opposed, not to the law in itself, but the provisions that were set before man if he was to obey the law.

According to Josephus the Sadducees believed that there is no fate, God does not commit evil, man has free will; “man has the free choice of good or evil,” the soul is not immortal, there is no afterlife, and there are no rewards or penalties after death. The Sadducees rejected the belief in the Resurrection of the Dead, which was a central tenet believed by Pharisees and by eEarly Christians. This often provoked hostilities. Furthermore, the Sadducees rejected the Oral Law as proposed by the Pharisees. Rather, they saw the written Torah as the sole source of divine authority.

So we do see that the Jewish religious leaders’ struggle to understand the covenant was something with which everyone would have been familiar, even though these two sects were not the only ones. But one thing was for sure, Jesus was strictly speaking of covenant and covenant provisions here within this parable. And these were understandable to most listeners, if not all.

First of all, God calls those with whom He shares His covenant. The lord of the vineyard comes to those who stand idle within the marketplace. We could not even toil for the lord of the vineyard, if he did not call us or elect us to do so. This isn’t a means to say what that elective process is, we are unsure of that and will not try to define it, because we fail in our finite understanding to comprehend the mysteries of God, so why try to define what we cannot through human reasoning? This has been a contentious subject within western Christendom for centuries, and has been the cause of much division. Scripture has revealed it, and if we place our faith in Scripture without getting

though, through election, my “finite-ness” comes into submission to His will, where true repentance and obedience is given unto the covenantal means of Grace, which brings me to a state of healing, where His likeness can be restored. So these gifts of faith and thanksgiving are given to us as a work of His will, and not by the will of my work.

When reward comes from the lord of the vineyard at the end of the day, those who remain grateful that they were elected to toil will take the penny with a joyous heart, knowing that they fully rely on the lord of the vineyard’s election, law, provision, and justice. It is just for Him do what He wills with His own.

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February 20, 2011

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Mass on Septuagesima Sunday, 2011.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Joshua 1: 1-9 (KJV).

⁴ “Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ St. Matthew 20:1-16 (KJV).

⁶ St. Matthew 20:16b (KJV).

⁷ Rector, St. Charles King and Martyr Anglican Church (APCK), Huntsville, AL.

Now we have ultimate free will. Now we see humanity as sick instead of dead. Now, all we need to do when we get tired of being sick is come to the physician, to be healed, instead of needing to be resurrected. According to these misapprehensions, personal salvation has everything to do with our cooperation with God, because ultimately He can't do anything without my approval, and the means of Grace stem from the sovereignty of man's will, instead of the Sovereign will of God.

How righteous these heterodox believers, or those who believe in a works-righteousness, actually stand before God is dependent on how faithful or not they are to the works of righteousness. Ultimately it is their will that maintains their status of rightness and holiness before God, and one can easily lose salvation with the slip of a tongue, an outburst of anger, or some other minute failing. In the end, who is called and who is chosen depends on whether we rely on the Sovereign will of God, or the will of fallen humanity. Do we toil for the sake of our calling, or are we called for the sake of our toiling?

Even these views of the covenantal means of Grace in the sacraments range from the choice of the human will to cooperate with God's will, at one end of that spectrum, to the complete lack of necessity for those means, at the other end. Remember, the sacraments are not something we do for Him, but they are something He does for us, because He is the author of the covenant. He wills to show us His love, and Grace, and mercy through the sacraments, and my faith or obedience does not have to be present for Him to work. In the Eucharist, I do not have to feed on Him by faith with thanksgiving. How I feed on him does not depend on whether I am being fed by Him or not. He gives me His Body and Blood, whether, I have faith in that or am thankful for that. He works by covenant, promise.

Because Christ, the infinite, fulfilled the means of satisfaction on behalf of the finite, my finite will or understanding does not have to be present to partake of His faithfulness, even

human reasoning in the way, we can rest in this truth without strife.

Paul says it most easily or most understandably in 1 Corinthians 12: no one can say that Jesus Christ is Lord, but by the Holy Spirit. We cannot say that based on our own will, or our own merit, or our own righteousness, but strictly by the fact He allows us by His Grace to do so. All of life is Grace. We stand idly in the marketplace. Our natural disposition as the seed of Adam is to be idle, or better yet, spiritually dead, rebellious. And our free will in this state is limited.

Because we have been created in His image, we do have free will, but until His likeness has been restored through Grace, our free-will will never choose Him. Until that likeness is restored and Grace has been bestowed, we remain spiritually dead, and the will and desire of a dead man, is dead as well. We don't need a band-aid, we need resurrection. The defibrillator of God's Grace is placed onto our chest, and somehow infuses enough life into our cold, dead selves to allow just enough brainwaves to begin circulating, that leads to a weak heartbeat in our spiritual resurrection, which will then lead us to faith.

Many Christians cannot or choose not to comprehend this. To them, Romans chapter 9, which I encourage everyone to read thoroughly, along with Romans 8, Ephesians 1, and Numbers 16, is not as inspired as the other chapters and books in the Bible. And some of the reasons which add to the contention amongst believers today is that outside of Saints Paul and Peter's writings, the witness of the early Church Fathers' were silent until the late 4th century/early 5th Century.

Then a British Monk named Pelagius challenged the Biblical understanding of total depravity and God's irresistible Grace, of our depending on God's Grace for spiritual resurrection. He pushed a sort of humanism to the extent that, he said, man doesn't need Grace because every child born of Adam isn't affected by the Fall, but in some ways is a new, clean slate, so

his Christianity was more of a moralistic philosophy than a religion of salvation. Saint Augustine defended Biblical, orthodox Christianity, and Pelagius was condemned as a heretic in 413 at the council of Carthage.

Paul, Augustine, and now in our Second Lesson Jesus, place our faith as a Grace that is given to us by the election of God and not by the free will merit of fallen humanity. The seed of the covenant, the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was based solely on the election of God and not by the will of fallen humanity. God elected the Jews to be the objects of His affection. And God elects those with whom today He shares His covenant of Grace. If God is truly a sovereign God, we cannot think of Him as a rickety old man, with a long white beard, begging those who will within the confines of their own strength, follow him.

He is either Lord of all, or He is not Lord at all. But we can rest assured of our election by the seal of His covenant, which is the circumcision not made by hands through the washing of regeneration, which is the sacrament of baptism, because God's Grace is covenantal and not dispensational. He still redeems by the same means, even though Christ perfected and fulfilled the old covenant. Until its perfection in Christ, those sacramental signs of the old covenant were just foreshadows of what we see in place within the new. Contrary to popular Protestant belief, the law was not abolished, but with its fulfillment came new signs.

Paul, being a Pharisee himself, a strict observer of the oral and written Law of God, before his conversion understood what it meant to uphold and fulfill the law of the covenant. The Pharisees emphasized a commitment to moral and social justice, belief in the brotherhood of mankind, and a faith in the redemption of the Jewish nation and, ultimately, of humanity. Moreover, they believed that these ends would be achieved through *halakha*, which means "the walk, or how to walk", a body of laws derived from a close reading of sacred texts. This belief

entailed both a commitment to relate religion to ordinary concerns and daily life, and a commitment to study and scholarly debate, hence the idea of running the race well to gain the incorruptible crown of life in I Corinthians, chapter 9.

Paul rested in the assurance of his election not only as a Jew, but as child of Grace, but knew there was the labor of the law to fulfill humanities requirements of the covenant. Here was the new covenant, with humanity's requirements completely fulfilled by the God-man Jesus Christ. All requirements to gain satisfaction and atonement for sin were satisfied by the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ on the Cross. And so the labor of the law, the *halakha* in this new covenant, was to emulate the One who made atonement and satisfaction.

The more Christ-like we become as children of covenantal Grace, the more it becomes evident to those who work beside us in the vineyard, and those, with whom to share this life of covenantal grace, we toil. That is why Paul stresses so heavily that we must live out this law of faith, and this is why he placed high standards in his exhortations to the churches to which he was writing. To toil to become Christ-like, to lay down one's life for the sake of humanity, to preach and reveal the truth of Christ's salvific atonement, to make disciples, to be the model of righteousness, the model of humility, to emulate self sacrifice, to display perfect love, to intercede in prayer for others, to give to those less fortunate from that which God has blessed us, to pour our lives out for the sake of God and others, this was the law, the race.

But there are those who have been called, and upon whom Grace has been bestowed, who nevertheless choose not to accept the terms of the covenant. We can never will ourselves into Grace, but we can choose what we do with it once it has been bestowed. Because we, as prideful humans, do not wish to be subject to God's sovereignty, or even to admit that we are subject to anything but ourselves, we have changed the doctrines of Grace and covenant to fit our own desires.