

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.⁴

“All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers. And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no. And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live. Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years. Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the LORD thy God chasteneth thee. Therefore thou shalt keep the commandments of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear him. For the LORD thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey; A land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass. When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the LORD thy God for the good land which he hath given thee. Beware that thou forget not the LORD thy God, in not keeping his commandments, and his judgments, and his statutes, which I command thee this day: Lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses, and dwelt therein; And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day. And it shall

be, if thou do at all forget the LORD thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish. As the nations which the LORD destroyeth before your face, so shall ye perish; because ye would not be obedient unto the voice of the LORD your God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the seventeenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.⁵

“And it came to pass, as he went to Jerusalem, that he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered into a certain village, there met him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off: And they lifted up their voices, and said, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. And when he saw them, he said unto them, Go shew [SHOW] yourselves unto the priests. And it came to pass, that, as they went, they were cleansed. And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God, And fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan. And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger. And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Sermon:

Never has there been anyone with a more profound insight into psychology than Saint Paul. He knew the true human condition far better than modern theorists such as Freud and Jung. Saint Paul could speak of the dichotomy between what we are in our imperfect, fallen, and mortal weakness and the hope of what we can be through the Holy Spirit.

He knew that the true dilemma of mankind is essentially a moral conflict. We know what we ought to be, and we know what we are. In writing to the Galatians, he contrasts the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit, and in so doing teaches us what we need to know about ourselves.

And, as always, he leaves us with a certainty that everything depends upon the grace of God in Jesus Christ. If we want to rise above the works of the flesh, we have to walk in the Spirit. Therefore, to attain godly character, we need the Holy Spirit. To live a life with these virtues that he calls “the fruit of the Spirit”, we must recognize that we need the grace of God, that we depend upon the Holy Spirit working within us. We are thus humbled by his words, given genuine hope, but hope that it is not from our own strength, about virtue for which we cannot take the credit. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in us, which means that we ought to be grateful rather than proud.

This takes us straight to the lepers in today’s Second Lesson. Upon finding themselves clean from their disease of rotting flesh, nine of the men who were healed simply went away somewhere, but one came back to give thanks. Furthermore, the one who came back was a Samaritan, a stranger. What the Lord had told the men to do was from the Law of Moses: “Go shew yourselves unto the priests.”

Perhaps the nine believed that they were being rewarded for obeying this commandment from the Law, namely the portion from Leviticus about the laws of leprosy. If so, maybe they reasoned that they had managed to earn their healing. Not so the Samaritan, who exhibited humility by his gratitude. These two qualities of humility and gratitude caused him to understand that his healing was all a matter of grace, even if he was fulfilling a specific commandment by doing as the Lord instructed.

After all, to obey a specific commandment of God earns us nothing, since we are only doing what is our duty as unprofitable servants. The Samaritan who was cleansed of his leprosy understood that he had been granted a miracle beyond his deserving, in fact a miracle that no one could have earned.

When we find that we have managed to act in charity, to have obeyed God’s commandments against our own sinful desires, to have avoided the occasion of sin, to have done good to those in need, or whatever other virtuous thing and good work we may have done, let us not lose sight of the truth. The fact remains that we are sinners nonetheless. So, do we wander off like the nine, or return to Christ with gratitude? No one deserves a miracle, and no one earns eternal life. When we perceive the grace of God at work within us, just as these men were

aware that their leprosy was cleansed away, do we imagine, as C.S. Lewis once put it, a halo around our own silly heads, or do we have the humility to be grateful, to give thanks for the grace of God in our own lives?

This is what connects today's Gospel and Epistle. The virtues are the fruit of the Holy Spirit Who has shed abroad the love of God within our hearts.⁶ We may like to believe we could have done it in our own strength. But let us have the humility to thank God for healing us from our state of walking death, like these lepers, and giving us life by the resurrection of Jesus Christ his Son.

The truth about the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit is that we live in a constant tension between them. On any given day, we find both of these presenting themselves and forcing us to make choices. People think of the "flesh" only in terms of sexual sin. But if we look at these "works of the flesh" that the Apostle has listed, we find among them sins that have a "spiritual" quality, like occultism and heresies. We find among them sins in how we relate to other people, sins of anger or gossip. We even see political sins.

The nature we have, as created by God, is not inherently sinful; rather it was rendered inherently weak, fallen from grace; and therefore it tends to sin because it is captive to death. How fitting leprosy is as an image of this condition. What St. Paul calls "the flesh," in this passage, lacks is the ability to rise above sin, and to rise to a level of perfect goodness. It is the limits of a nature fallen, in many ways limited to concerns about survival and gratification. It cannot rise to the level of God's righteousness by its own power.

Too many people misunderstand the idea of grace. They confuse it with mercy. It is favor, certainly; but, it is unmerited as a consequence of the Fall into sin and death. However, even the picture of Adam before the Fall is the picture of a creature who lived by grace (that is, his very life was a gift), and who depended upon grace. He was created by a gracious act; he lived by God's gracious will, and when he fell into sin he was barred from partaking of the fruit of the tree of life, that is, barred from remaining in the grace of God as an immortal and eternal being. For grace and gift are translated from the same word in the Greek New Testament, *Charisma*. Adam's life was a gift, that is, it was grace. And so, the Fall brought death: "In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die."

Pelagius was a heretic from Britain who lived in the Fourth Century. He taught that we have the power within ourselves to be perfectly holy without God's grace. In a way, he revived the oldest heresy about which we read in the Book of Acts, the doctrine of those converts from the Pharisee party who said that unless the Gentiles became circumcised and fulfilled the Law of Moses, they could not be saved. Both the "Judaizers" (an unfortunate term, because it *sounds* anti-Semitic, though it is not meant to) of the first century, and Pelagius of the fourth century, taught that we can do it alone, that is, become perfect without God's grace. Saint Paul (along with the other Apostles, if we read the actual Scriptural account) refuted the Judaizers, as later Saint Augustine refuted Pelagius.

Today's Second Lesson is also the Gospel for Holy Communion today, and there it is accompanied by a portion of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians.⁷ This Epistle is about how we cannot be saved by our own efforts, and we cannot become holy by our own strength. The Law teaches us, but it does not make us into "good people." We need the humility and gratitude that it takes to depend upon the Holy Spirit, and even that humility and that gratitude must come from Him. We don't possess the power within ourselves to generate those. But God gives us everything good if only we will stop treating the Holy Spirit like a stranger.

What do we see in the cleansing of the lepers? Leprosy is a disease that gives us a picture of the way Saint Paul speaks of "flesh." The skin is rotting as if the poor leper were dead already. Jesus cleansed the lepers, and their flesh was made as healthy as that of a newborn babe. In Baptism, Jesus gives us back our lives, made clean from original sin, and made new. In the Sacrament of Absolution, He gives us back our lives, cleansed yet again. In giving His Flesh for food and His Blood for drink, He gives us the food and drink of eternal life, making Himself the tree of life from which our first parents were barred. In the Sacrament of Confirmation by the laying on of the Apostle's hands, Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit upon us and into us.

As we present ourselves to Jesus Christ, returning to give thanks, we enter into a new life marked by gratitude. And that gratitude is the mark of humility. And all of this is the evidence of God's grace working within us. The Holy Spirit is a very active agent in our lives as we return to Jesus to render thanks, for in drawing close to Christ by living this whole sacramental life within His Church,

and by feeding on His word within our hearts, we surrender to the Holy Spirit; and we cooperate with His grace.

This is how the fruit of the Spirit grows. The Law cannot give us this, because we are weak through sin. But in drawing close to Jesus Christ in gratitude, His Spirit makes to grow within us love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. Against such there is no Law.

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The Rev'd Robert Hart⁸
September 24, 2011

¹ “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).

² This sermon was originally written on the Epistle and Gospel for Holy Communion on the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2011.

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxiii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ Deuteronomy 8:1-14, 17-20 (KJV).

⁵ St. Luke 17:11-19 (KJV).

⁶ Romans 5:5.

⁷ Galatians 5:16-24.

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