

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
The Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the Second Book of the Kings, commonly called the Fourth Book of the Kings.⁴

“Now Naaman [**NAY-uh-munn**], captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honourable, because by him the LORD had given deliverance unto Syria: he was also a mighty man in valour, but he was a leper. And the Syrians had gone out by companies, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid; and she waited on Naaman’s [**NAY-uh-munz**] wife. And she said unto her mistress, Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy. And one went in, and told his lord, saying, Thus and thus said the maid that is of the land of Israel. And the king of Syria said, Go to, go, and I will send a letter unto the king of Israel. And he departed, and took with him ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment. And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, saying, Now when this letter is come unto thee, behold, I have therewith sent Naaman [**NAY-uh-munn**] my servant to thee, that thou mayest recover him of his leprosy. And it came to pass, when the king of Israel had read the letter, that he rent his clothes, and said, Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? wherefore consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me.

“And it was so, when Elisha the man of God had heard that the king of Israel had rent his clothes, that he sent to the king, saying, Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel. So Naaman [**NAY-uh-munn**] came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. But Naaman [**NAY-uh-munn**] was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper. Are not Abana [**ABB-uh-**

nuh] and Pharpar [**FARR-parr**], rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage. And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith [**SETH**] to thee, Wash, and be clean? Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

“And he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and came, and stood before him: and he said, Behold, now I know that there is no God in all earth, but in Israel: now therefore, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-sixth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.⁵

“... So Jesus came again into Cana [**KAY-nuh**] of Galilee, where he made the water wine. And there was a certain nobleman, whose son was sick at Capernaum [**kah-PURR-nay-umm**]. When he heard that Jesus was come out of Judaea into Galilee, he went unto him, and besought him that he would come down, and heal his son: for he was at the point of death. Then said Jesus unto him, Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe. The nobleman saith [**SETH**] unto him, Sir, come down ere my child die. Jesus saith [**SETH**] unto him, Go thy way; thy son liveth. And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way. And as he was now going down, his servants met him, and told him, saying, Thy son liveth. Then inquired he of them the hour when he began to amend. And they said unto him, Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him. So the father knew that it was at the same hour, in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth: and himself believed, and his whole house. This is again the second miracle that Jesus did, when he was come out of Judaea into Galilee.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “*Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.*”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

Why is this story from St. John’s Gospel even written, inasmuch as it is nowhere near as spectacular as the really dramatic miracles, such as the raising of Lazarus from the dead? What was the Apostle John thinking? And, yes, we believe he was guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit but, inasmuch as that inspiration was to his mind and reason, it is right to ask what John was thinking.

Like the healing of the centurion’s servant, this is the kind of miracle all too easy for a skeptic to dismiss. So we must learn why each of those stories is included in the Gospels. The centurion’s story is not very spectacular either; but what it teaches us about faith is. This story seems to be addressing more the subject of faith than anything else.

What we read seems contradictory at first glance. “*Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.*” Is this a rebuke? Is the Lord displeased? If so, He doesn’t show displeasure. If needing to see a sign was a weakness, then the Lord gave the weak man what he needed most.

Near the end of John’s Gospel, we see the resurrected Christ saying to Thomas, “*Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.*”⁷ Is this a rebuke? That seems unlikely, inasmuch as it was the will of God for the Apostles all to be eyewitnesses of His post-resurrection appearances.

As terrible as this may seem to the advocates of “tough love,” it seems very obvious that Christ was making allowance for human weakness, even a weakness in faith. To Him it is not great faith that is necessary, but only faith as small as a grain of mustard seed.⁸ People who

present themselves to others as possessing great faith generally are those of little faith, little in quantity and quality. Even a grain of mustard seed is much larger, and that is because it is real.

One of the ways in which the popular American “faith and prosperity” message does damage is in convincing true believers that they don’t have enough faith to please God; otherwise, the logic runs, they would be in perfect health all the time, they would have no economic problems, and they would always be happy all the time. That kind of religion doesn’t produce faith, but rather it demands a show, an outward presentation of a jolly, successful and happy life; people who belong to such churches can show no sign of weakness (no wonder they have no confession of sin), and risk being on the outside if they do. So, in the place of faith, they learn hypocrisy and denial.

Their error is a reflection of a very old one. Those who think they can earn salvation by the accumulation of merits never know if they have accumulated enough. Those whose faith must be great never know if their own is great enough. None of them can have any assurance that his sin is forgiven and that he will inherit eternal life.

But, in the Church as established by Christ, there is no need to impress each other; and the sacrament of Confession and Absolution is for everybody, even bishops and other clergy. Simply put, there is no room for pride, including the pride of being “spiritual” and “fervent in faith” to all outward appearance.

Back in the 1980s, as the people of one church to which I then belonged were awaiting a bus to Washington, D.C., for the March for Life, we allowed some Pentecostals to meet at our church and use the same bus. They decided to pray with us, and one of them went through a very theatrical prayer in which she attacked the forces of Hell with alarming self-confidence. After she had her say to God, and to all the forces of Hell, I asked everyone to turn to the General Confession, and asked the rector (I was not yet a priest) to follow with the Absolution. For I knew that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.⁹

When we were present in Washington at that event, several speakers were on a platform, and a rabbi was asked to lead prayers. His words included, “O God, our hands have not shed this blood...” But, looking at that vast crowd, I could not accept his words. His prayer was empty as long as he boasted (and I know of a number of Christian clergy who would say, essentially the same thing he did). We must never pray thus to ourselves, as did the Pharisee in the Temple, “*I thank Thee God that I am not as other men are.*”¹⁰ Some of those people had indeed shed this blood; some had indeed paid for or received abortions. But they had repented and gone to God for forgiveness. That was part of why they had come.

The point John was making was very simple. When Jesus said, “*Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe,*” indeed, He was not pleased with that. But God is gracious. This brings us into deeper things that must be understood. I have said before: Beware of a religious teaching that says that life is a test. Life is not a test. Life is a shipwreck. If life is a test, we all have failed already.

*“As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.... But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.”*¹¹

So, you see, life is not a test. We did not need an examiner, and we do not need a grade. The grade we each and everyone receive is “F.” We don’t need proof that we were born as fallen creatures given to sin and death. Jesus did not come into the world to grade our report cards.

He came to this shipwreck to rescue us from sin and death. It is called the grace of God; it is called mercy; it is the manifestation of the love of God meeting us at the point of our real need, even if we do not perceive our need at all. It is summarized in those words of Jesus that each of you should know:

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”*¹²

It seems so simple, so basic; and so why do we lose sight of it? Because we are in a spiritual war, and the main weapon of our common enemy is deception. It is good and right to preach about sin, because we also have the message of mercy and forgiveness. The world today doesn't want to hear about forgiveness. They want instead to have Divine approval stamped on every choice they have ever made or will make. Until they recognize that sin is still sin, but also that repentance and confession bring about forgiveness and healing, as a priest I can do nothing for them.

God met us in our weakness, at the point of our real and greatest need. That is why He poured out His life on the Cross, letting His blood be shed as the one perfect offering, the propitiation for the sins of the whole world. It is why He did not cast off His human nature, but rose from the dead to remain one of us forever. It is why He met the need of a man who needed to see signs and wonders to believe, and healed his son. It is why He gives mercy to you. It is why He came into the world.

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The Rev'd Robert Hart¹³
October 28, 2012

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 Gospel for Holy Communion on the Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

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

⁴ II Kings 5:1-15a (KJV).

⁵ St. John 4:46b-end (KJV).

⁶ St. John 4:46 (KJV).

⁷ St. John 20:29 (KJV).

⁸ St. Matthew 17:20; St. Luke 17:6.

⁹ James 4:6.

¹⁰ St. Luke 18:11 (KJV).

¹¹ Romans 3:10-12, 21-26 (KJV).

¹² St. John 3:16-17 (KJV).

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