

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹

Quinquagesima Sunday²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the nineteenth Chapter of the Third Book of Moses, called Leviticus.⁴

“And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy.

“...

“And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the LORD your God.

“Ye shall not steal, neither deal falsely, neither lie one to another.

“And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the LORD.

“Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour, neither rob him: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning.

“Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the LORD.

“Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.

“Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour: I am the LORD.

“Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him.

“Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the First Epistle General of St. John.⁵

“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world. Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error. Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

Today I want to focus on the Second Lesson from St John's First Epistle and the message of love. I have a short story before we begin. A man was driving home one evening and realized that it was his daughter's birthday and he hadn't bought her a present. He drove to the mall and ran to the toy store and he asked the store manager, "How much is that new Barbie in the window?"

The Manager replied, "Which one? We have, 'Barbie goes to the gym' for \$19.95, 'Barbie goes to the Ball' for \$19.95, 'Barbie goes shopping' for \$19.95, 'Barbie goes to the beach' for \$19.95, 'Barbie goes to the Nightclub' for \$19.95, and 'Divorced Barbie' for \$375.00."

"Why is the Divorced Barbie \$375.00, when all the others are \$19.95?" Dad asked surprised.

"Divorced Barbie comes with Ken's car, Ken's House, Ken's boat, Ken's dog, Ken's cat and Ken's furniture."

That's pretty funny and probably has nothing to do with my message, but I got a good chuckle when I read the story and thought I'd share it. Perhaps there is a lesson of the cost of divorce in the joke: that Barbie took all. But, of course the cost of divorce and the dissolution of marriage runs far deeper than the material things in our lives. The aspect of becoming one flesh with another person when married and then having that relationship dissolved causes a real tearing of spirit and soul. It is like when two pieces of paper are glued together and you try to separate the pieces, the paper naturally tears.

Today's Second Lesson is perhaps a divorce-proofing lesson, some words to help us in our marital relationships and all other relationships as well in families, among friends, in church, in workplaces and simply all around.

I'd like to read some of the Second Lesson again in a modern English version.

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.”⁶ The Greek here for beloved is *agapetos* [ah-gah-PAY-toes]—stemming from the word we’ve heard so many times—*agape* [ah-GAH-pay] for love. The word *agapetos* [ah-gah-PAY-toes] means dearly beloved, very much loved. When Jesus was baptized the voice of God used this very same word saying “this is my beloved Son” about Jesus. We are specially chosen and loved by God.

Because we are beloved by God we are to love one another. We are to *agapao* [ah-gah-PAY-oh]—to choose to exercise agape love toward each other. *Agape* [ah-GAH-pay] love is characterized by a choice of the will, not a romantic or emotional kind of reaction, but a decision to act in service toward another person.

“Let us love one another; for love is from God **and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.**” We are coming back to the concept of the two legs of our walk in faith: our salvation in Christ and Christ dwelling inside of us. The idea of being born of God is very important for us to grasp.

We don’t use the word begotten or to beget very much in our modern English. To beget has a very specific meaning of being born from a particular kind of being and the new created entity being the same substance as the source. There is a difference between begetting something and making something. When we *beget* children, we are part of the creative process and we produce children. A human produces a human, a dog a dog, and so on. The reproduction by begetting is one kind producing the same kind.

When we *make* something with our hands using materials, we make something that is outside of ourselves. We can make clay pottery or even build a house or car. We make things using a very creative process but still we make things that may show our creativity and in that reflect who we are, but they are not us, they are not humans.

When we say the Nicene Creed every Sunday we confess our belief that Jesus Christ is God, that He is co-eternal with God the Father and the Holy Spirit; One God in Three Persons. We say Jesus was “begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God; begotten not made....” We are restating what the Word of God and Jesus taught us, that He is God and He was before the world began. Jesus was begotten of the Father, not made. Jesus is of the exact same kind of substance of God, just as our sons and daughters are of the same kind as we are from the moment of conception, human beings.

In Genesis, we read that God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness....”⁷ We are made by God in His image, but we are not God. We reflect some of the attributes of God but we are not God just like what we make is not man. We might make a statue or even a movie that has people in it looking alive and real, but the statue and movie are made not begotten. They are not real people or men.

So, since we are made by God from the dust of the earth, we are not God in our nature. We are physical, finite beings. But, in the spiritual realm, in the work of Christ and through Him something very special can happen to us and our nature.

When we come to Christ through faith in Him, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, through baptism and the washing away of sin, we are born again. In being born of God **we are now begotten by Him**. We are given His Spirit within us. As C.S. Lewis says in *Mere Christianity*, “we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. If we do, we shall then be sharing a life which was begotten, not made, which always has existed and always will exist. Christ is the Son of God. If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God. He came into this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has—Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”

Saint John says if we love we are begotten or born of God. John goes on to say, “For God is love.... In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only (begotten) Son into the world, so that we might live through

him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”⁸

The fact that God is love speaks to the idea that He is Three Persons in One, for love must have another person to be served. To personify love God must be more than one person interacting within the Godhead—the Father-Son-and Holy Ghost all serving each other in love. God is not an impersonal force or some kind goo or ether or static thing. God is dynamic and interactive even within the Godhead of the Three Persons.

I think it’s probably impossible for us to truly understand God since we are so finite compared to His infiniteness. But a geometric example may help a bit. A single point or dot is one-dimensional. A line becomes two dimensions from point to point. With two dimensions we can draw shapes like a square or circle or triangle. When the third dimension is added, the flat shapes can take forms of a cube or sphere. It would be impossible for the dot to understand the sphere or the square to understand the cube. We who are one-dimensional in our person cannot fathom what it would be to be a being of Three Persons—One God in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—interacting within Himself with love.

Because God is love He sent His Son to the world that we might live through Him. He first loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. “Propitiation” comes from Latin, meaning a sacrifice to make an atonement or appeasement for to placate or sooth anger. Our sins put us under God’s wrath. The Blood of Jesus puts out the fire of that anger completely. It is dealt with and gone forever. This is the first leg of walking in faith: salvation from the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

God’s love for us is demonstrated by His service to us; by sacrificing Himself on the Cross—even though we don’t deserve this kind of sacrifice. We don’t earn it by our good behavior. We don’t earn God’s sacrifice by being perfectly obedient to Him. In fact, if God were to keep score and extend His service toward us only based on what we deserve, then we’d be left in the cold dark place apart from Him—or perhaps a very hot place of the lake of fire. The point being that He acts towards us in service, in love even when we don’t deserve it.

How do we then apply this to our lives, to our marriages, our families and friends? We are supposed to serve others and demonstrate commitment to serving them for their good even when they do not deserve it. You may be saying to yourself, “well you don’t really understand my situation. If you were in my house for even a little bit, and saw what a challenge my wife or my husband is, you wouldn’t be saying this. You just don’t understand how hard they are to live with the things they do—or don’t do—the things they say; it is just amazing....”

I’m sorry to say all the excuses in the world we can generate fall flat when compared to what God has done for us. God sends the rain to the good and evil. God sent His son to all of us who are selfish and evil. None of us are deserving, yet God offers grace, mercy, and forgiveness. God is always looking for ways to reconcile, to draw back into a relationship, to bridge the gap or divide and bring unity between Himself and us.

With God dwelling inside of us, we need to tap into His Spirit and ask Him to work through us to mirror in our homes what He does to all mankind. We are called to love others, to serve them, even when they don’t deserve it, with God’s Spirit working in and through us. Here is one phrase that helps me and I think can help you when you come up against a challenging situation, when you are being frustrated by the circumstances or behavior of another person. In those times ask God, “what am I supposed to be learning in this situation?”

I have found in my frustration when I go to God and ask Him that an answer comes and along with it comes a peace and an ability to serve or do things I may not have wanted to do otherwise. Since God is Sovereign and in control of the universe, nothing comes into my life that He does not allow in my life—including a spouse or child or work relationship that may be driving you absolutely nuts. But God is more interested in shaping my character to be more like His Character, like the character of Christ, than He is in any one situation. So, He allows things in my life to help shape my character.

So often we’ll hear Romans 8:28 quoted, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to

his purpose.”⁹ But we need to continue to the next verse to get the fuller meaning, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined ***to be conformed to the image of his Son....***¹⁰ God wants to use all the things in our lives for our good to bring us into the image of His Son—to become more in-line with being begotten by Him.

So when I don’t feel like loving, when the circumstances or situation of someone really bugging me are hitting me so hard I feel like screaming, I need to stop and go to God and ask, “what am I supposed to be learning in this situation? What do you want me to learn to shape my character?” And then I need to listen in my heart and allow the Holy Spirit to work in me and show me how I can love others when I don’t feel like it or when I feel like they certainly don’t deserve it.

St. John goes on to say if we love one another God dwells or abides in us, He remains in us ***and His love is perfected in us.*** We have here the second leg of our walk in faith. We need exercise the understanding of His presence by actively engaging God in a dialogue, by talking with Him and by allowing Him to show us what we are to learn in every circumstance we face and how we can demonstrate the love of God to others. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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The Rev’d Jeffrey Scott Johnson¹¹
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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 for Holy Communion on the First Sunday after Trinity, 2013.

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

⁴ Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 (KJV).

⁵ 1 John 4:1-end (KJV).

⁶ 1 John 4:7 (ESV).

⁷ Genesis 1:26.

⁸ 1 John 4:9-10 (ESV).

⁹ Romans 8:28 (ESV).

¹⁰ Romans 8:29 (ESV).

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