

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

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Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.ⁱⁱ

“At the same time, saith [**SETH**] the LORD, will I be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus saith [**SETH**] the LORD, The people which were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness; even Israel, when I went to cause him to rest. The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry. Thou shalt yet plant vines upon the mountains of Samaria: the planters shall plant, and shall eat them as common things. For there shall be a day, that the watchmen upon the mount Ephraim [**EE-frih-eeem**] shall cry, Arise ye, and let us go up to Zion unto the LORD our God. For thus saith [**SETH**] the LORD; Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations: publish ye, praise ye, and say, O LORD, save thy people, the remnant of Israel. Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return thither. They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim [**EE-frih-eeem**] is my firstborn.

“Hear the word of the LORD, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock. For the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and ransomed him from the hand of him that was stronger than he. Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the LORD, for wheat, and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall

be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all. Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, both young men and old together: for I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and make them rejoice from their sorrow. And I will satiate the soul of the priests with fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, saith [SETH] the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him.

“And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: ““Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.””^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

It is well known that over time, people become like the gods they serve and worship. The Bible says that’s as it should be. The God of the Bible is holy. His people should also be holy.

There is a text from Leviticus that says, “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy.” The same theme recurs throughout the Torah and is even echoed by Jesus when He says, “Be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” The motivation for seeking to live a holy life is that we are called to be like the God we serve.

Perfection in the sense of purity is one aspect of holiness, and it is the one on which the Pharisees focused. Their concept of holiness was largely a negative one. It consisted primarily of things that a holy person does not do. He does not lie. He does not steal. He does not move boundary markers. He does not sleep with another man’s wife. He does not eat pork. He does not work on Saturday. And there are many other things that a holy man does not do. Much of the Jewish law consists of such prohibitions: “Thou shalt not... Thou shalt not... Thou shalt not.”

There is a lot to be said for this understanding of holiness. That which is holy is set apart from that which is profane or ordinary. When we say that God is holy, we mean that He is different from us and different from the other so-called gods that people worship. God is what we call “transcendent”. He stands apart from the creation as both its beginning and its end. He is beyond our understanding and beyond the boundaries of what human language, human thought, and human art can express.

That transcendence provides a theological basis for the negativity of the Jewish law. The people of God are not to be like the rest of the world. They are to stand apart from it. They are not to intermarry with Gentiles and they are not to eat the same food or prepare their food the same way. The Jews are to live by moral standards that neither pagans nor their gods observe. They are to be a holy people – a people set apart to reflect the nature of God. They are to be perfect in the sense of being uncontaminated by the sinfulness of the nations among whom they live.

The Pharisees went even further. They separated themselves from those of their own people who did not observe the same strict standards of holiness that they themselves practiced, or at least professed.

But Jesus shows us that there is more to God than His transcendence, and there is more to holiness than simply standing apart and being different. God is also imminent. He is involved with His creation and works within it as well as from outside of it.

So while the Pharisees practiced a holiness of withdrawal, Jesus practiced a holiness of engagement. While the Pharisees dwelt on the righteousness of God, the justice of God, and the purity of God, Jesus emphasized the mercy of God, the generosity of God, and the love of God for all of His fallen creation. This, too, is holiness.

The imminence of God was fully displayed in the birth of Jesus. The uncreated Son, “begotten not made”, “very God of very God”, entered into the created world as a fully human, fully mortal, fully limited individual, totally involved with the created world. It is true that He was Jewish and therefore holy in the sense of being set apart. But Jesus taught that simply avoiding certain foods, and avoiding certain activities, and avoiding certain people and certain situations is not sufficient for a life of holiness. There is also a positive side, which Jesus demonstrated by making contact with people to whom the Pharisees would not come near.

The interplay, actually the clash between, these two concepts of holiness is evident in this morning’s Second Lesson. Just as they would later be scandalized when Jesus allowed a prostitute to wash His feet, the Pharisees were scandalized when Jesus sat down to a meal with tax collectors. These were not the kind of tax collectors we all know and hate. Those tax collectors work for our own government. The tax collectors in the Gospel, also called publicans, were Jews who collected taxes for the foreigners who occupied the country. They were traitors and collaborators as well as people who often kept somewhat questionable accounts. St Matthew was one of them. But when Jesus called him, he left all that behind and became a disciple – a learner of a new way of life.

The negativity of the Pharisees is a first step in the process of salvation in the same way as the acknowledgment of sickness is the first step in its cure. You need to die to sin before you can be reborn to

newness of life. You have to renounce the old before you can embrace the new.

So the first question asked a candidate for baptism is this: “Do you renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that you will not follow or be led by them?” That’s the first step. The second step is to believe in Christ and confess the faith of the Church as set forth by the Apostles in the Creed that bears their name. The third step, and perhaps the most important one, is to reflect and imitate the mercy and the generosity and the love of God as evidenced in the Incarnation, the ministry, and the sacrifice of the one who is the visible image of the invisible God.

That One is the Man Who called Matthew to leave his old life and begin a new one, and Matthew jumped at the opportunity. He not only became a disciple of Jesus, but he invited his fellow publicans and other sinners to do the same. As he traveled with Jesus, Matthew listened carefully to His words and recorded many of them for posterity. He learned that the mission of Israel was not only to live differently than the Gentiles but to engage them and teach them the ways of God and lead them to the Savior that God had sent to all men, both Jews and Gentiles.

The Pharisees seem to forget that. In primitive societies, the healer is considered to be a holy man. So Jesus reminded them: “They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick.”

And the Man Who called the tax collector to follow him also calls us. He calls us to leave behind old habits, old pursuits, old ways of understanding the world, and most of all, our old ways of looking at people. We are not to build fences but to build bridges. We are to associate with people who engage in practices that are offensive to God, not to join them in those practices, of course, but to show them a better way. Notice I said “Show them.” I did not say “Tell them.”

St. Paul says to the Ephesians, “You are not to walk as other Gentiles walk in the vanity of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past

feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. You have not so learned Christ.” He goes on to talk about lust, and anger, and theft, and gossip, and lying, and foul language, and he says that as Christians we are to avoid all that. But the same Apostle also talks about kindness, and forgiveness, righteousness and true holiness, the kind of holiness that Jesus possessed.

Conclusion:

Certainly we are to avoid being contaminated by the sinfulness of the world around us. The Pharisees had that part right. The God we serve is transcendent and pure. But Jesus exhibited another aspect of God’s character, and He calls us to strive for that kind of holiness.

We can begin, and we must begin, by following the example of St. Matthew. Turn your back on whatever part of your life is contaminated by sin. Walk away from it. In other words, repent. Then follow Jesus. Listen carefully to what He has to say. Carry His words to those who have not heard them, and pass them on to the generations that will follow. Do not stand apart from the world, but stand in the midst of it, and demonstrate there the kind of holiness that Jesus brings — perfect love, perfect humility, perfect compassion, perfect forgiveness. To such holiness Matthew was called. And so are we.

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St. David’s Anglican Catholic Church
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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Jeremiah 31:1-14 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Matthew 9:9-13 (KJV).*

^{iv} *St. Matthew 9:12b (RSV).*