

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
Ember Wednesday in Advent¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“Keep silence before me, O islands; and let the people renew their strength: let them come near; then let them speak: let us come near together to judgment. Who raised up the righteous man from the east, called him to his foot, gave the nations before him, and made him rule over kings? he gave them as the dust to his sword, and as driven stubble to his bow. He pursued them, and passed safely; even by the way that he had not gone with his feet. Who hath wrought and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? I the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he. The isles saw it, and feared; the ends of the earth were afraid, drew near, and came. They helped every one his neighbour; and every one said to his brother, Be of good courage. So the carpenter encouraged the goldsmith, and he that smootheth with the hammer him that smote the anvil, saying, It is ready for the sodering: and he fastened it with nails, that it should not be moved. But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend. Thou whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called thee from the chief men thereof, and said unto thee, Thou art my servant; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away.

“Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. Behold, all they that were incensed against thee shall be ashamed and confounded: they shall be as nothing; and they that strive with thee shall perish. Thou shalt seek them, and shalt not find them, even them that contended with thee: they that war against thee shall be as nothing, and as a thing of nought. For I the LORD thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee. Fear not, thou

worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel; I will help thee, saith **[SETH]** the LORD, and thy redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. Behold, I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth: thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shalt make the hills as chaff. Thou shalt fan them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the whirlwind shall scatter them: and thou shalt rejoice in the LORD, and shalt glory in the Holy One of Israel. When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the LORD will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys: I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the shittah tree, and the myrtle, and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the fir tree, and the pine, and the box tree together: That they may see, and know, and consider, and understand together, that the hand of the LORD hath done this, and the Holy One of Israel hath created it. Produce your cause, saith **[SETH]** the LORD; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob. Let them bring them forth, and shew **[SHOW]** us what shall happen: let them shew **[SHOW]** the former things, what they be, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare us things for to come. Shew **[SHOW]** the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods: yea, do good, or do evil, that we may be dismayed, and behold it together. Behold, ye are of nothing, and your work of nought: an abomination is he that chooseth you. I have raised up one from the north, and he shall come: from the rising of the sun shall he call upon my name: and he shall come upon princes as upon mortar, and as the potter treadeth clay. Who hath declared from the beginning, that we may know? and beforetime, that we may say, He is righteous? yea, there is none that sheweth **[SHOW-eth]**, yea, there is none that declareth, yea, there is none that heareth your words. The first shall say to Zion, Behold, behold them: and I will give to Jerusalem one that bringeth good tidings. For I beheld, and there was no man; even among them, and there was no counsellor, that, when I asked of them, could answer a word. Behold, they are all

¹¹ St.Luke 14:16-24 (KJV).

¹² Psalm 34:8 (KJV).

Contrary to the way some modern Evangelicals think, evangelism is not finished when someone “accepts Jesus.” A person needs to be baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, and to taste of the Master’s Supper, the Blessed Sacrament of His Body and Blood. Evangelism, properly understood, requires the ministry of God’s word and sacraments.

Nonetheless, one ministry everybody has is contained in those words we heard: “*Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.*” The Holy Spirit who dwells within you gives gifts that enable and empower each of you, in ways so varied that no one could know them, to be a witness that Jesus Christ is Lord, and the Savior of the world. Love has to be your motivation for helping others come to know Him.

“And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

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The Rev’d Robert Hart
June 17, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the propers for Holy Communion on the Second Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 31 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xx (CIPBC 1963).

³ Isaiah 41:1-end (KJV).

⁴ I John 3:1-end (KJV).

⁵ I John 4:19 (KJV).

⁶ Romans 5:5-8 (KJV).

⁷ I John 4:11-13 (KJV).

⁸ Galatians 2:20 (KJV).

⁹ I John 4:19-21 (KJV).

¹⁰ I John 3:15-18 (KJV).

vanity; their works are nothing: their molten images are wind and confusion.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the First Epistle General of John.⁴

“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure. Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law. And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him. Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous. Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you. We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his

life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment. And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

Now that we have left the Trinitytide that ended the previous Church year and have begun a new Church year with a new Advent season, we have entered into the first half of this new Church year. It is as if the Church year divides like the two tables of the Law. The first four commandments are about our duty to God, corresponding to the First and Great commandment: "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.*" All these: Thou shalt have none other gods but me, Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain, Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath-day, are the first table and it is these themes we explore during the first half of our liturgical year.

The second table of the Law, comprised of all the rest of the Commandments, is about our duty to our neighbor, and

formerly been thought of as unclean, so much so that no Jew could enter their houses. This tells us that taking the Gospel to those who are outside the pale is a great act of love in itself.

This is from St. Luke's account of Our Lord's parable of the rich man who made a great supper:¹¹

"Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you that none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper."

Evangelism is a duty, an act of charity that we owe our neighbor; it is a manifestation of love. If we are to evangelize seriously, love for neighbor must be our motivation rather than simply a need to grow our churches. Yes, the Master wants them to come into His house. But this is not to fill pews, collect more money, or keep up with the churches that boast of more members.

The Master wants His house to be filled, and the emphasis is on the feast. The emphasis on the feast speaks of the "Marriage Supper of the Lamb," a reference to eternal joy for those who are raised to immortality on the Last Day. Nonetheless, the use of a feast in the parable should also draw our attention to the Blessed Sacrament. One very real part of our duty to our neighbor, born of the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, is to invite people to come in. That invitation is to "*taste and see that the LORD is good*".¹² This presupposes that we help them to true faith in Jesus Christ so that they may be full members of His Church.

“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.”⁹

And so, today’s Second Lesson:

“Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.”¹⁰

This is practical, and speaks of love that acts spontaneously, because it is a reality always present. Though St. John’s words make us think of practical, earthly necessities (and the Church has always emphasized ministry to the poor concerning their practical needs, including medical needs), we must remember that John expressed his love most clearly by preaching the Gospel, and writing to the end that we would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

The first generation of Christians faced rejection from many of their fellow Jews, and at the same time they came to see that the Gospel is for all nations, and so began including Gentiles in the Church as God had foretold and as Christ commanded. This began when St. Peter went to the house of Cornelius, and then, in time, it became the ministry of St. Paul more than any other, to take the Gospel to people who had

those principles correspond to the second Great commandment, “*Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*” Honour thy father and thy mother, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor, Thou shalt not covet, are commandments briefly summed up by love of neighbor. These are the themes about which we teach and on which we meditate during the second half of the liturgical year. If you were prepared for Confirmation according to the requirements laid out in the Book of Common Prayer with its Offices of Instruction, you know these things.

In the Epistle and Gospel for the First Sunday after Trinity, and then in those for the Second Sunday in that same season, we find a theme of duty to our neighbor. When I say that the Church year reflects these two tables of the Law, I draw from the First Epistle of St. John, which is read at the Eucharist on those first two Sundays after Trinity and which recurs as our Second Lesson today. There we read that “*We love him, because he first loved us.*”⁵ That love of God for us is what the first half of the Church year teaches us in detail. We begin by looking ahead, focusing on the day when Christ will come again in glory. On the first Sunday of the Church year, we see that His coming will be like a refiner’s fire, seeing His cleansing of the temple with a view to the last day and His coming to judge the quick and the dead.

Then, soon after that, we are told the story of God’s great love on Christmas, when the babe, the world’s redeemer, first revealed His sacred face. We are then reminded all throughout Epiphany that He went about doing good, healing all who were oppressed of the devil. In Lent we enter with Him into His fasting and discipline, and prepare to follow Him to Gethsemane, and then to His trial and death.

At that point we see the greatest manifestation of God’s love:

“And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”⁶

St. Paul tells us the same thing that St. John tells us, and also reminds us that the Holy Spirit makes this a reality in our own hearts. Our love for God is only possible because He first loved us, and gave His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

The first half of the church year draws most of our attention to what God has done for us in His Son, Jesus Christ. It is summarized by a hymn:

“O Love, how deep, how broad, how high,
how passing thought and fantasy,
that God, the Son of God should take
our mortal form for mortals' sake.
For us baptized, for us he bore
his holy fast and hungered sore.
For us temptations sharp he knew,
for us the tempter overthrew.
For us he prayed, for us he taught,
for us his daily works he wrought,
by words and signs and actions thus,
still seeking not himself but us.
For us to evil men betrayed,
scourged, mocked, in purple robe arrayed.
He bore the shameful cross and death,
for us gave up his dying breath.
For us he rose from death again;
for us he went on high to reign;
for us he sent his Spirit here

to guide, to comfort and to cheer.
All glory to our Lord and God
for love so deep, so high, so broad;
the Trinity whom we adore
forever and forevermore!”

(Text: Thomas á Kempis; trans. Benj. Webb, J.M. Neale, alt.)

This corresponds to the first and great Commandment because we cannot manufacture love for God. If not for what Jesus did on this earth, and if not for the Holy Spirit’s coming down to the Church on the day of Pentecost, we could not love God. His love for us is emphasized in the first half of our year, and this does not merely require our love for God; it produces it: *“We love him, because he first loved us.”*

After Pentecost, we enter into Trinitytide and the emphasis turns immediately to the second table of the Law. As we see in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, and as we heard in today’s Second Lesson: *“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.”⁷* Our love for neighbor also comes from the same love of God manifested in Jesus Christ, manifested most visibly on the Cross where He died for each of us—love you must learn to take personally, as St. Paul took it personally, saying with him *“... the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”⁸* Your charity, grown as the virtue of perfection in your heart by the Holy Spirit, is love that begins to take root and grow only because you know that the Son of God loved *you*, and gave himself for *you*.

That produces love for God, and produces love for your neighbor. In this opening of Trinitytide, we see that we cannot love God if we do not love our neighbor: