

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
Ember Wednesday in Advent¹

⁹ St. John 13:34-35 (KJV).

¹⁰ I John 3:16 (KJV).

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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 re-

deemer, 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 [SETH] the King of Jacob. Let them bring them forth, and shew [SHOW] us what shall happen: let them shew 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 vanity; their works are nothing: their molten images are wind and confusion.”

It isn't that we deserve to be loved—we all know that we often do not deserve love. But as God is love and therefore loves His creation, so we as His creation are to love others: “*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.*”¹⁰ This is the mark of the Christian: Love—*agape* love—given freely to God's creation just as He has given that same love to us.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, as You have loved us, so let us love Your creation, following Your commandment that we love one another. Remind us always that we seek to see You in others, and have them see You in us. Let us always show forth Your love in all that we do, Lord. This we ask in the Name of Him who loved us that we might be saved, the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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The Rev. Larry Wagoner, MSW¹¹
June 9, 2013

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the Second Sunday after Trinity, 2013.

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 Ezekiel 3:4-21 (KJV).

⁴ I John 3:1-end (KJV).

⁵ I John 3:17-18 (KJV).

⁶ I John 3:16 (KJV).

⁷ I John 3:18 (KJV).

⁸ I John 3:14-15 (KJV).

truth.”⁷ John’s call to this kind of love follows his caution for what we deserve if we fail to cultivate “*agape*” for our fellows: “*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.*”⁸

How can it be that the failure to love each other makes us murders? If we cannot love one another, support one another, take care of one another, then we surely cannot protect one another and ensure each other’s safety and well-being. In a world in which we are all under attack from the powers of evil, this means that we give our assent to all the evil that the world can bring to bear upon us when we could have prevented it.

This is direct disobedience of our Lord’s command: “*A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*”⁹ So not only do we obey our Lord’s own command when we love one another, but in that loving, we give to the world the sign that we are His followers.

“*Agape*” love is an act of the will. It is the willful, conscious decision to love others as God has loved us—**because He has loved us**—and has commanded us to likewise love the rest of His creation. It is not always our first choice or preference to love our fellows. It is God’s choice that we do so.

I am reminded of an elderly gentleman who drove a school bus for the little school I attended as a child. His was a bus filled with ruffians and hooligans, it seemed, and we were always giving him grief of one kind or another.

I will never forget his answer to me one day when, in a fit of fifth grade bravado, I asked him why he was so nice to us, even when we acted so badly. He just looked at me with his weary eyes and said with a grin, “I can’t help it—I just love you!”

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.

Text:

“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.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Homily:

Love is surely the most celebrated emotion of all time. Yet with all the songs, the poetry, the novels and stories, it is also one of the most misunderstood and, frankly, misused of emotions as well.

The Greeks tried to dispel these misunderstanding by dividing up the meanings of love into differing relationships. They proposed that “*Eros*” was that rushing, overpowering passionate love between a man and a woman that makes us take leave of our senses and become overwhelmed with passion.

This is the love depicted in literature and music, in which people swoon for each other, and act in all sorts of foolish ways, as if in some kind of trance. But from this state also comes jealousy, and all the evils that attend that possessive insanity that is jealousy.

The ancient Greeks called this love “*Eros*”, which means intimate love, which stems from the need to be one with the other in either a physical or emotional sense. But this kind of love at least implies a sense of possession, of ownership. But love cannot come from the need to own someone, because that ownership itself is destructive to the object of the desire.

No, love is rather the desire for the best for that other. Love is the desire that the other, rather than the self, be uplifted, be rewarded, be celebrated, and experience only the very best of what life can offer. Love is the devoutly-held desire that another be first in all things.

This is that love that the Greeks referred to as “*agape*”, which is self-sacrificial. This is not the romantic love of “*eros*,” nor is it the friendship or brotherly love of “*philia*.” Instead this is the pure love from and of God. It is different in character, nature and expression from the other forms, and is the actual **being** of love.

As St. John tells us, “*Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us.*”⁶ How much more sacrificial could God possibly be than to give Himself for us that we could be reconciled to Him and to the Father? Our Lord is the supreme example of love, giving His life for us, by suffering for our sins, though He did no wrong and deserved no punishment.

And, St. John calls us to reflect and display that same kind of “*agape*” love in our own lives: “*My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in*