

The Propers for the last few Sundays have dealt with the Love of God, and with the application of that Love to the lives of human beings – what can be summed up as the Grace of God operating in our lives. The Gospel for this Sunday, coming from St. Luke, Chapter 6, was originally included in the Sarum Rite as an Embertide Lesson intended as advice for the clergy about how they were to interact with their congregations. Gradually, the Propers for this and the following several Sundays have come to be interpreted as advice on how all Christians, not just the clergy, are to interact with the rest of humanity.

The Epistle sets the stage for this effort. Paul says that the future glory we are to enjoy will far exceed the trials we are enduring today. There are three quick conclusions that can be arrived at:

- The Greek word used to express “not worthy to be compared”, is *axios* meaning to “cause to move” as in adding weight to a scale. As used in this verse, the translation adds emphasis to Paul’s conclusion that the present trials and tribulations of mankind are not sufficient in weight to offset the ultimate glory that is in store for us.
- The duration of our present troubles, since they belong to this present age, are nothing as compared to the unchanging and eternal glory “that will be revealed” in the age to come.
- This ultimate glory will be revealed in us, not just to us, in the resurrected and perfected bodies that we will assume on the day of judgement.

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, a well-known Methodist preacher of the 20th century who restored expository preaching to the modern Methodist pulpit, put it this way: “The great reality is **the glory** that is coming.... Hold on to this idea, that we do not really belong to this present age, that our citizenship is in heaven. This present world is passing, transient, temporary. The world to come is the real, the permanent world. That is the one that has substance and which will endure forever.” That is the world that is coming, and we are members of it!

Well, we may be citizens of the world to come, but there is no denying that we have to get through this world first. Commencing with this Sunday, we turn toward how we are to apply God’s Love and Grace in our own lives. The beginning verses in today’s Gospel from Luke 36 are the concluding sentences of a passage that deals extensively with how we as Christians are to conduct ourselves in dealing with each other. Jesus has just finished selecting his twelve Apostles, and is preaching to them his first great sermon. “Be merciful..., Judge not..., Condemn not..., Forgive..., Give.... All these strong imperative statements are gathered up with the summary assertion “For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you”. Truly these words express both the expectation and the benefit of living out the second half of the Summary of the Law; “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”. These imperatives can also be assembled into a specific rule for life that is in fact stated in the preceding verse 31 of the same chapter, known to all of us as “The Golden Rule”: 31 “**And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.**”

I want to draw emphasis to a very important aspect of these imperatives; **they are positive and proactive in nature**. They are positive admonitions to do something, not negative admonitions to not do something. This is more than an inconsequential point of semantics. Negative admonitions to not do something are a common theme in the creeds of many other religions:

- Hillel, one of the great Jewish Rabbis, was challenged to teach the whole law while he stood on one leg. His response was “What is hateful to thee, do not to another. That is the whole law and all else is commentary”.
- Philo, the great Jew of Alexandria, said, “What you hate to suffer, do not do to anyone else”.
- Isocrates, the Greek orator, said “What things make you angry when you suffer them at the hands of others, do not you do to other people”.

- The Stoics had as one of their basic rules, “What you do not wish to be done to yourself, do not you do to any other”.
- Confucius, in responding to a request for a statement on how to live one's life, replied “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others”.

Even our 10 Commandments, coming from the Old Testament, are loaded with “thou shalt nots”, rather than “thou shalt”. The issue is not that these negative admonitions are inherently wrong, but more that they are inherently inadequate. Every one of these forms is a prohibition to action rather than an incitement to proactive effort; that is the issue. It is easier to avoid doing the wrong thing than it is to proactively go out and do the right thing. All things being equal, human nature dictates we take the easy way out. How many times a day do we take the easy way out of being Christian and just avoid doing something wrong, rather than taking the proactive and more difficult move of stepping into a situation to do something right? There is also a related issue with negative admonitions; they encourage the search for loopholes or ways to get around them. Many times people spend more time and effort trying to find a way around doing something than would be spent in just doing it in the first place. It is hard to find a loophole when you are being told to treat others as you want to be treated; much easier to decide that I am not going to do the same despicable thing that my neighbor is doing to me. My point in all this is not to bash other religions, nor to indicate that the “thou shalt nots” are wrong, but to focus on the need to proactively take our position forward. Jesus did not charge us to just go to church every Sunday morning, and rest on our laurels for the balance of the week. Certainly, the avoidance of sin is part of what is expected of us, but that is part of our over-riding charge to take the Gospel good news that we have been given forward – to add converts to our ranks as true believers!

Then there is the issue of where to look for proper guidance on how to lead our proactive efforts. Jesus speaks a brief parable regarding the blind leading the blind. This portion of scripture has historically been interpreted as a warning against following the false teachings of religious leaders, a situation that was rampant in His time. He equates false disciples (the scribes and Pharisees) to blind guides, and properly indicates that both they and their followers ultimately end up in the same ditch. Then he underscores both the problem and the solution by making the statement “The disciple is not above his master; but everyone that is perfect shall be as his master”. The reference here is that Christ is the master and proper source of guidance, and that if the disciples will study and learn from Him, they will be evident to all others as being Disciples of Christ.

Finally, we hear the counsel to make certain to correct our own shortcomings before we strive to correct others. This saying has to be approached carefully for a literal interpretation of it could be seen to be in direct conflict with earlier prohibitions against “judging” and “condemning”. The appropriate context for understanding this statement has more to do with how we conduct ourselves, rather than what we say. “Hypocrites” is a term that Jesus used to characterize those (the scribes and Pharisees) “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised all others” (Luke 18:9). Humbly accepting that we all have some pharisaic tendencies, the need to correct our own shortcomings before seeking to correct others is what is being called for here. “Walking the talk” is how we establish credibility in the eyes of others.

And thus the Gospel reading comes full circle. The lesson is that we will not be remembered by our words, but by our deeds. Fortunately or unfortunately, proactive deeds are the basis for living Christian life, not fine words and promises. Treat others as God treats you, taking care to not let customs and practices of the day sway you from the clear charge of scripture, and making certain that your actions support your words. This is how the Christian is to live his life. As Phillips Brooks has said, “Be such a man, and live such a life, that if every man were such as you, and every life such as yours, this earth would be God's paradise.”

SERMON – THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY –9-JULY 2017

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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And remember that it is not the fact that we consistently fail to achieve God's requirements that is important. It is the fact that we continuously and proactively strive to achieve them that is important to God. Ralph Waldo Emerson observed that "every man takes care that his neighbor does not cheat him. But a day comes when he begins to care that he does not cheat his neighbor. Then all goes well." May all go well with all of us, this day, and forevermore. *Amen.*