

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity: 9/11/11

Intention: Self-Dedication

The Very Rev. Tony J. Howard

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Amen.

In both readings for this morning—that from St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans and that from St. Matthew’s Gospel—the writers set before us a clear example to emulate, the example of Christ himself. Paul urges us to bear the weaknesses of our brothers and sisters even as Christ has borne and continues to bear our weaknesses. In much more colorful words, this is precisely the advice Fr. Rogers was trying to give me, you’ll recall, when I told him I wanted to be a priest and he told me about that with which I would have to put.

The clergy are not to lord it over the laity; employers are not to lord it over their employees; the rich are not to lord it over the poor; parents are not to lord it over their children; husbands are not to lord it over their wives; professors are not to lord it over their students; the Romans are not to lord it over the Israelites; the Israelites are not to lord it over the Palestinians; North Dallas is not to lord it over South Dallas; Plano West is not to lord it over Plano East; you get the idea. In short, the powerful are not to lord it over the powerless because, St. Paul argues, God did not lord it over us, as well he could have, mind you, being God and all, but humbled himself, in Christ, taking the form of a servant. How un-Godlike, Paul’s hearers must have thought then; and how difficult, how counter-intuitive many of his hearers likely think now. Even so, Paul’s conclusion is clear: “Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.”

In St. Matthew’s gospel Christ says he has not come to alter Torah one iota but instead “to fulfill” it, and he tells the crowd unless “your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” That’s a tall order, friends. That’s like saying that unless we are more virtuous than Mahatma Ghandi or Mother Teresa, we may as well forget it.

Christ then goes on to illuminate how his teaching does, in fact, “fulfill” rather than alter the Law. The selection as provided in our lectionary is unfortunately elliptical, so allow me to fill in the blanks. He begins a series of paragraphs beginning “You have heard it was said [by Moses, basically],

but I say unto you. . . .” and then he gives a fuller treatment, one that he expects his hearers to follow. The following comes from the NRSV translation. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. . . .”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

“You have heard it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven. . . or by the earth. . . Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (Remember Ghandi’s response to the Babylonian “eye for eye, tooth for tooth”? He said following that dictum would make all of us blind and toothless!)

At any rate, I think you can see that our lectionary sometimes provides impoverished renderings of the scriptures, an issue Reader Gerry and I hope to address at the coming Triennial when we will propose adopting the Common Lectionary in use by most liturgical churches today. So, now we’re back on track for today’s gospel, which concludes: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” It doesn’t get much clearer than that, does it? We are to love EVERYONE, even our enemies, because that’s how God works, lavishing love on all of creation—good, bad, and indifferent. Not content to love us from afar, God loves us in the midst of our messiness in Christ himself two thousand years ago, fully God and fully Man. In Christ himself today in the

blessed sacrament of the altar, fully God and fully matter, given to all—eat and drink ye all of this-- SO THAT we may be Christ himself loving one another lavishly, some might say foolishly.

Yes, it's a matter of faith; I cannot prove to you this is so, but there's some logic to it, isn't there? St. Matthew is telling us that God doesn't play favorites, nor should we. God "puts up with a lot of shit"; so should we. With Paul, we should not lord it over others but *serve the Lord in others*. I couldn't have asked for better readings for this ten-year anniversary of 9/11, where again we recall with sadness, anger, and vindictiveness that day some three thousand souls left this earth at the hands of those inexplicitly chanting "God is Great!" as they themselves met death. Can you think of a more concrete enemy whom God is calling us to love? It's not a popular topic in American pulpits, I'm sure, but God is not an American; and if we are to "be perfect as [our] heavenly Father is perfect," then we need to figure out how to love those men who killed those people. We need to figure out how to love our enemies, whoever they may be: greedy bureaucrats, Tea Party wackdoodles, right-wing fundamentalists, rude customer service representatives, texting drivers, etc. And we need to learn how to love not just those perceived enemies *out there* but also those *in here*: the enemy of ennui, the enemy of fear, the enemy of failure, the enemy of greed, anger, sloth, lust, gluttony, covetousness, and pride. For if we don't, if our righteousness doesn't exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, then we shall have missed the mark, indeed.

Can we do it? Can we learn to love not just our families and friends but also our enemies, showering our love indiscriminately just as our Heavenly Father showers his love indiscriminately? Christ certainly thought it possible and gave us the tools to help us: the holy sacraments, the holy scriptures, holy tradition, and, perhaps most importantly, the unwavering support and example of our brothers and sisters. Let us be known by our love, against which there is no law.

And now to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost, Three Persons in one God, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all honour, might, majesty, power and dominion, now, henceforth and forevermore. Amen.