

2.20.2022 Sexagesima (2 Corinthians 11:19-31)

Two weeks ago we discussed a passage from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians in which he exhorted Christians to "*put off*" or "*put to death*" everything in our lives that is not of God, so that we may "*put on, as the elect of God*" all of those holy attributes that are a beautiful reflection of His Divine image. The words Paul used in this passage help us recognize the truth that the objective act of taking off the old, and putting on the new, is complete. He tells us that we "*have put off the old self... and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator*" (Colossians 3:9-10).

By the grace and mercy of Almighty God, our old self, the unregenerate, guilty, slave to sin was drowned in the waters of Holy Baptism. We left our former self there, and clothed ourselves in the new life of Christ. We received forgiveness of sins, we were grafted into His Church, and through the power of the Holy Ghost we were made sons and daughters of God. As St. Peter writes, baptism "*saves us*" (1 Peter 3:21). This objective work of God is complete, and yet too often our day to day experience is summed up in the old saying, "I tried to drown the old Adam in the waters of baptism, but I discovered the miserable wretch can swim!"

At our baptism we were clothed in the righteousness of Christ. The writer to the Hebrews assures us that we "*have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*" (Hebrews 10:10). In other words we have been separated from our sins and set apart to God by the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, and yet the struggle we encounter every day as we strive to do good and avoid evil is a powerful reminder of the truth that (as we read in the ninth Article of Religion) there is an infection of our nature that remains even after baptism. Scripture also speaks in these terms. In his letter "*to the churches of Galatia*" (1:2), St. Paul, writing to Christians, tells them that "*the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do*" (5:17). In his letter to the Romans, Paul repeats that thought and applies it to himself in a very personal way, saying, "*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate*" (Romans 7:15).

This side of heaven, even St. Paul found himself to be far short of perfect. He was acutely aware of the miserable presence of the “old Adam” in himself, and while only Paul could tell us with certainty, perhaps it was his conversion on the Damascus road, the awe and wonder of his personal encounter with Absolute Truth and Infinite Holiness that made him so very aware of the remaining evil in his heart, or it could have been his own advance in holiness that marked the depth of his hatred for sin. Only St. Paul knows the reason for his completely honest self-assessment, and yet when you read his words one thing is clear, He longed to be made perfectly holy, to be completely renewed in the image of his Creator, to love and serve and adore God as the angels love and serve and adore the God of Heaven and Earth.

St. Paul was well aware of the objective truth that through baptism we “*have put off the old self... and have put on the new self.*” After all, he is the human author of those Divine words, but even this saint found himself in the midst of an ongoing process in which he was *being renewed* day by day. He was increasing in holiness and righteousness, growing in “*grace and knowledge of our Lord*” (2 Peter 3:18), being formed into a “*new creation*” in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). In Paul’s example, and throughout Holy Scripture, we recognize sanctification as both a completed act, and the ongoing process of being formed into the *image and likeness* of God (Genesis 1:26-27).

There is an ongoing process of sanctification, and we all know that where there is a process (a caterpillar transformed into a butterfly, a block of marble made into a beautiful sculpture, a stack of lumber being used to construct a house), there is a cost associated with that process. In the Epistle we read this morning St. Paul demonstrates that he was, by the grace of God, willing to faithfully pay that price. Paul was prepared to pay the full price of discipleship, ministry, and all that God was leading him through and using as a means to conform him to the image of His Son. In this Epistle, Paul writes about his sacrificial life of service, a life of obedience that was being used by God to set him apart, to sanctify him, and from the perspective of our Gospel reading, a life that was being used by the Sower to abundantly cast His precious seed on every type of ground. To plant, to the end that God would give the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6), that He would make it grow, and the seed would bring forth fruit with patience and perseverance (Luke 8:15).

St. Paul was willing to spend and be spent. He is an example not only of a life being sanctified through obedience to the Sower, he is also an example of the good ground that Jesus spoke of in this parable, because unlike the seeds that fell among rocks or thorns, which were swept away in times of temptation, or were choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of this life, the seed that fell on the good soil of Paul's heart took root, and grew, and still bears fruit today (Luke 8:4-15).

That seed bears fruit even today because by the grace of God, St. Paul received it, held it close, and never let anything take it from his heart; not beatings or imprisonments, not hunger or thirst, not cold or nakedness. St. Paul fought "*the good fight of faith*" (1 Timothy 6:12) against countless forces. He fought. He paid the price of faithful discipleship, the cost of ongoing sanctification, and as we consider the example of St. Paul this morning, an important question to ask ourselves is this: Are we willing to pay the price of sanctification? Will we allow God to have His way with us, to set us apart, to make us holy, as He is holy? (1 Peter 1:16).

The passage we read today described only a portion of what sanctification cost St. Paul, and to read about all of the trials and sorrows that he so faithfully endured is to realize sanctification cost Paul his life. Holiness cost him every part of himself that was not of God. Ask yourself again: Are you willing to pay that price? Are you prepared for God to do such a mighty work in you? Will you humbly and faithfully open your heart and soul and mind so that "*He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*" (Philippians 1:6).

I'll leave you with this thought from C.S. Lewis. In *Mere Christianity* he wrote: "Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making

courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”