

4th Sunday after Trinity (Holy Communion)

The Collect (Fourth Sunday after Trinity)

O God, the protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy; Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal: Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake our Lord. Amen.

Epistle: Romans 8:18-23

¹⁸ For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

¹⁹ For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.

²⁰ For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope,

²¹ Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

²² For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

²³ And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.

Gospel: St. Luke 6:36-42

³⁶ Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

³⁷ Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven:

³⁸ Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.

³⁹ And he spake a parable unto them, Can the blind lead the blind? shall they not both fall into the ditch?

⁴⁰ The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master.

⁴¹ And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

⁴² Either how canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye.

Introduction

I was raised in the small city of Pocatello, Idaho. Founded in the early 1800's, Fort Hall and Pocatello became a major stop for settlers traveling to Oregon and California on the Oregon trail. Although thousands of immigrants passed through it was not until the discovery of gold in 1860 that Idaho attracted settlers in large numbers. The gold rush brought a need for goods and services to many towns, and Pocatello was the corridor initially used by stage and freight lines. The coming of the railroad provided further opportunities for resources and "Pocatello junction" became an important transportation crossroads of the Union Pacific railroad.

I learned all about the history of the railroad in school, and as I got older, I discovered large piles of railroad ties lying around the tracks and in abandoned fields. Many people would take their pickup trucks and collect these large pieces of wood to use in landscaping projects or to build fences. Me, I remember going there with my friends in search of lizards, snakes and scorpions. In a world where the internet did not exist, and video games were not commonplace, this was a fine adventure for the day. Even occasionally spotting a rattlesnake did not dissuade us from our search, as the element of danger was exciting.

As I look back on this activity, the one thing that I always hated was how many slivers I would get in my fingers and hands from the dry, rotting wood we were moving around and turning over. It seemed like every time I went out hunting lizards; I would come home with a shard or sliver embedded in my finger. I remember my mother getting out the tweezers or a sterilized needle to dig the shards of wood from my flesh. It was usually a painful experience and sometimes resulted in infection.

One Sunday, around that time, while attending Sunday service at our home church of St. Andrews Episcopal, our Rector, Fr. Bob, gave a sermon on the same gospel reading we have today, Luke 6:36-42. When he read verse 41 “*And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?*”, it made me shudder. After dealing with slivers of wood in my fingers, the thought of something like that in my eye was horrific. I was thinking that a large piece of wood, let alone a whole beam, wedged in my eye would be something I would definitely notice, and the sermon was one I remembered because of that imagery. It was one of my first lessons in the folly of judging others and realizing I was just as guilty of sin, just as prone to being messed up, as anyone else.

As the years went by, I learned to recognize this as a lesson in hypocrisy and personal accountability. Years of training in law enforcement ethics would give me

a foundation and a reminder to “do the right thing, for the right reasons, every single time.” Mrs. Fifield, my third-grade teacher, would often tell us, “remember when you point your finger at someone, three more are pointed at yourself.” A trusted mentor once told me that all of us were one bad night from being on the other end of the flashing lights or desk of a parole officer. He taught me to be humble, be accountable and to have compassion and mercy when you hold power. Many different things combined to shape and develop me as a person, but personal accountability was one I took seriously. These are lessons all of us should learn as we navigate life. Today, let us look further into this passage from Luke and how it can help us to guide and form our lives into one that honors God and loves our neighbor.

Body

Our Gospel reading for today, from the Sermon on the Plain, is a prominent collection of teachings by Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Luke (6:20-49). Given after a night of prayer and the selection of his twelve Apostles, Jesus descended a mountain and stood on a "level place" to address a large crowd. In this discussion our Lord strips away our natural desire for retributive justice and replaces it with a confrontive, beautiful standard: we are to be stewards of the Father's mercy, refusing the easy, often dramatic, process of passing judgment on others.

In verse 36, Jesus gives the command, *"Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful"* (Luke 6:36-42). Jesus does not tell us to be merciful because it is good social policy or because it makes the community run smoother. The baseline of Christian ethics is the character of God Himself. In our liturgy for Holy Communion, we constantly re-anchor ourselves to this character. We pray in the Prayer of Humble Access that God's "property is always to have mercy." If mercy, along with love, is one of God's defining attribute toward us, it must become our defining attribute toward our neighbor. This is the core of our understanding of grace and sanctification. We do not manufacture mercy out of our own power and resolve; we bring up the mercy we have already received. As our Collect for today notes, without Him, *"nothing is strong, nothing is holy."*

The next two verses 37-38 expose the attitude of grace. *"Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven. Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again."*

In this passage, Jesus lays down a spiritual law that what we throw out into the world returns to us. If we live by the sword of hyper-criticism, we will find ourselves exposed to the same sort of judgement. The imagery in this passage is of a grain merchant filling a measuring fabric so abundantly that it spills over the

sides into the fold of the garment. It is the imagery of a bustling ancient marketplace where a generous merchant refuses to skimp on the grain. This section mirrors the architecture of our liturgy in Morning Prayer. We enter with the General Confession where we admit that "*We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep*", acknowledging our need for mercy, which immediately prepares us to recite the Lord's Prayer, where we pray this verse: "*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" We are asking God to use the exact same measuring cup on us that we use on others. We are asking God for mercy, and we are reminded that we must give mercy to others as well.

Jesus then reveals through the use of a parable, the value of spiritual formation and following the right people, who give us the right guidance. "*And he spake a parable unto them, Can the blind lead the blind? shall they not both fall into the ditch? The disciple is not above his master: but everyone that is perfect shall be as his master.* (Luke 6:39-40). We must be careful about who we choose as our spiritual guides, cultural commentators, and mentors. If we follow those whose ministries are fueled by outrage, division, and judgment, we will become just like them. Jesus reminds us that a student cannot rise above their teacher. If our spiritual guide is our own unexamined ego, we will inevitably end up in the ditch of self-righteousness. This is why the Anglican tradition relies so heavily on a structured Liturgy and the historic Creeds and teachings of our church fathers,

rather than individual novelty. We acknowledge the wisdom and truth of the collective, historic focus on the teaching and doctrine of the Church to avoid wandering blindly into error or heresy. Our ultimate template is Christ, the True Master, our only hope of Salvation.

Jesus then uses a powerful visual example, along with a little hyperbole, to drive home the dangers of hypocrisy. *“And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Either how canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye. V. 41-42).* Here Jesus describes a man with an entire timber beam (from the Greek, *dokos*, or a main roof support beam) protruding from his eye trying to perform delicate microscopic surgery to remove a tiny speck of sawdust or a splinter (*karphos*) from his brother's eye. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, before approaching Holy Communion, the Church explicitly calls for individual, quiet examination of our own lives. We do not look at the altar rail to see who else is kneeling there and judge their worthiness; we look at our own hearts to see what "beams of wood" are obstructing our view of the Cross. This verse is a call to the historic Anglican practice of regular, rigorous self-

examination. Before we speak a word of correction to our families, our parishes, or our society, we must look in the mirror and see how God would view what we see.

Action

The goal of this passage is not to leave the speck in our brother's eye forever. We must acknowledge that sin is dangerous, and we are called to bear one another's burdens and to help each other. However, the sequence matters. We cannot help anyone heal until we have allowed the Holy Spirit to perform surgery on us first.

This week, when you are tempted to offer a sharp judgment or point out the speck of wood in someone else's life, pause, and recall the mercy of our Father. Take a step back, examine the timber in your own eye, and let the divine correction of the Holy Spirit reform your vision. Let us move into the week not judging others, but rather showing mercy, and giving of ourselves just as God has done for us.

Conclusion

In one of the commentaries I have on Luke, chapter 6, the author states *“When we look at the world through the lens of St. Luke 6, we stop viewing the church as a courtroom where we sit as judges and begin viewing it as a hospital where we are all recovering patients.”* This is a beautiful analogy and speaks to why we confess our sins to Almighty God and ask His forgiveness, with contrite

hearts and an honest intent to change. We are invited to the Altar today not because we have successfully removed every speck from our neighbor's eye, but because we acknowledge the need for God to heal our own blindness. Let us receive the overflowing, amazing grace of Christ, and go forth to echo that same mercy to a broken world. Let us glorify God in all we do and in how we treat our neighbors.

“To the only wise God our Saviour, *be* glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.”