



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Trinity 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 & St. Luke 19:41-47

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Our lessons last Sunday called us to be stewards of grace. The prodigal son reminds us that it is only by grace that we come to the Father—humbly, confessing our sins, and trusting in the grace offered to us by Jesus as the cross. And the prodigal son's older brother reminds us never to take that grace for granted. He was living under his father's grace too, but it had become so commonplace for him that he'd forgotten. He started to think that he had earned his position and that he had earned his father's love, and because he forgot about grace, he hated, despised, and resented his repentant brother. Today the lessons remind us that we're stewards not only of God's grace, but that because we are in his grace, we are also stewards of his gifts. In our baptism we have put on Jesus Christ; we have his Holy Spirit living in us; we're equipped with his gifts; and we have a mission—we have a covenant—to live out.

Let me read the instructions that are given to the newly baptised at the end of the baptismal service in the Prayer Book:

“And as for you, who have now by Baptism put on Christ, it is your part and duty also, being made the child of God and of the light, by faith in Jesus Christ, to walk answerably to your Christian calling, and as becometh the children of light; remembering always that Baptism representeth unto us our profession; which is, to follow the example of our Saviour Christ, and to be made like unto him; that as he died, and rose again for us; so should we, who are baptized, die from sin, and rise again unto righteousness; continually mortifying all our evil and corrupt affections, and daily proceeding in all virtue and godliness of living.”

As Christians we're called to a new profession—a new way of life. And yet the Scriptures remind us over and over

again not to take that life for granted—not to forget it. Every one of us was once the prodigal son, but Jesus reminds us—every one of us—not to forget God's grace and not to become the older brother. But there's more to the Christian life than just remembering that we are sinners who have come to God based on the righteousness of Jesus. Our baptismal vows remind us that we have a job to do—a new profession and a new way of life.

It often strikes me how, when people see my clerical collar, they automatically assume that I'm a professional “holy man”. But brothers and sisters, just because I earn a living as a full-time minister of the Gospel doesn't mean that I'm holier than thou. It doesn't mean that my mission and my calling are different than yours. Because the fact is that every one of us is called by Jesus to be holy. Again, we're called to make a life of following “the example of our Saviour Christ.” We're called to “die from sin, and rise again unto righteousness; continually mortifying all our evil and corrupt affections and daily proceeding in all virtue and godliness of living.” And so we need to be looking at our lives and asking ourselves whether or not the people around us see Jesus in some way when they look at us.

Today's Epistle from 1 Corinthians 12 is a reminder to us when it comes to our new profession. The Holy Spirit gives us tools to work with—tools that we use to fulfil our mission of honouring our Father and showing the love, mercy, and grace of Jesus to the world. In the Corinthians church there were some people who were abusing and misunderstanding the gifts—the tools—they had been given. Look at 1 Corinthians 12:1-7:

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the

common good.

The First thing St. Paul makes very clear is that we're all in this together; we're all working toward a common goal. It always amazed me when I had a secular job how a group of people who all had the same goal—or at least, were supposed to have the same goal—could end up rivals. When I fixed computers for a living I worked in a shop with several other technicians and there was always at least one guy who seemed to have it in for the rest of us. He was usually the same one who seemed to think that everybody else was dead-set on making sure he didn't succeed or he questioned whether or not the rest were on the same team. Usually the underlying problem is that that guy's goal wasn't to fix computers, make the customer's happy, and make our company successful; he wasn't a team player and his real goals were strictly selfish ones.

We've all been in situations like that and so, right or wrong, we expect that to happen in the world. Sadly it happens in the Church too. And so Paul reminds the Corinthians, as they work and minister together, that as Christians we've all got the same goal. Jesus is our Lord. In fact, if we want to know who's on our team—who's with us—all we have to do is look for the people who claim Jesus as their Lord, because no one can or will ever make Jesus their Lord unless the Holy Spirit is living in them.

In Corinth there were all sorts of problems, but one of the biggest seems to have been that some of the Christians there were in it for themselves. They started to rank God's gifts in a hierarchy and some of them were claiming that because they had one or another particular gift they were more important and they were more spiritual than the others. We can't say exactly what gifts they singled out, but it was very much like those today who claim that speaking in tongues is *the* evidence of the Holy Spirit living in a Christian and who teach that if you don't have that particular gift, then you're missing the Spirit.

This is why Paul steps us back a bit and shows us the *first* gift that we're all called to be stewards of. He tells them—and us—that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” To make Jesus your Lord is what it means to be a Christian. That's the ultimate and bottom-line evidence that you have trusted in

Jesus Christ: you make him your Lord—you follow him. Jesus said, “If you love me, *obey my commandments*.” “Follow me.” That’s how we got the name “Christian”. It literally means “Christ follower.” It was originally pinned on Christians as a derogatory term but those First Century believers took it as a badge of honour. But that we follow Jesus at all is the first and most important gift of the Holy Spirit. We’ve all been given other spiritual gifts, but those gifts aren’t what make us spiritual. What makes us spiritual is the gift of the Spirit that has turned our hearts to Jesus in the first place. Even if that were the only gift we had, we’d still be spiritually rich.

Faith in Jesus is the universal gift of the Church. It’s what allows the Church to exist and what binds us together. But the Church has more work to do than just to believe. And so God the Holy Spirit gives us all specific gifts as individuals. In Corinth—and still today—people had forgotten that these gifts all come from the same source and for common ministry. We have “varieties of gifts”—different endowments. We have “varieties of service”—different tasks. We have “varieties of activities”—different ways of fulfilling our mission. But even though we’re all equipped differently, there is one Spirit who is the source of all grace, and one Lord whom we serve, and one God who fulfils himself in all sorts of different ways. We need to remember that we’re all on the same team and every one of us is a valuable member of it.

In the second half of the lesson Paul elaborates on the various types of gifts that the Spirit gives to his Church:

For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Corinthians 12:8-11)

Some of the gifts that the Spirit gives are of the head. Paul gives the example of

utterances of wisdom and knowledge. Some people are called and gifted to be theologians and philosophers. Some people are called and gifted to serve the Church as thinkers, as academics, and as intellectuals. I’m not sure what it is about the age in which we live, but it seems that especially in today’s Church the people with gifts of the head are viewed with suspicion. They aren’t practical enough. Because there have been so many divisions in the Church, a lot of people don’t trust or don’t like the idea of “doctrine” anymore. It divides us instead of bringing us together, some people say. And so they’d rather not talk about theology or about doctrine or about anything that might raise our differences and separate us. But the fact is that we need the gifts of the head. These are the people that met in council in the Early Church and dealt with our doctrine, who dealt with the heresies that plagued the Church and that threatened to lead her away from Jesus, and who hammered out the Creeds that we use to affirm our faith when we gather each week. These are the people that educate us and that keep us from falling into error. Think about it: If we are the body of Christ, what happens if you cut out the brain? The body dies.

But the brain isn’t the whole body, it’s just one part. And so Paul describes gifts of the *heart* too. These are the people who are caring and compassionate. They’re the people who wear their faith on their sleeves. A lot of the time they can be the exact opposite of the intellectuals. They might have no interest in the academic or in doctrine. When I was in university I used to be part of a group of guys who would get together each month to discuss theology. We’d often read a well-known or historical theological text and then discuss it. That was how we grew our knowledge and our faith. But there was a guy in my church who looked down his nose at us. He was always telling us how we were wasting our time and getting distracted from the *real* mission of the Church. He used to tell us that the Christian only needs one book: the Bible. He lived by that principle. He refused to read any book having to do with the faith other than the Bible itself. All he wanted to do was to be an evangelist and tell others about Jesus and in his mind reading other books would just waste his time and possibly lead him away from the Bible. At the time, we intellectuals I’m sad to

say, looked back at him down our own noses. But the fact is that the Church needs both. You can’t cut the brain out of the body, but you can’t cut the heart out either.

And then Paul reminds us that there are people who have been given gifts of the hands and feet. These are the people who are always there to do the work. They don’t need miracles to get things done—they’ve just been given the faith to get their hands dirty and to move mountains even if they have to do it one shovelful at a time. They’re the ones who look at the intellectuals and saying, “How about less thinking and more working!” They look at the people with gifts of the heart and say, “We’ve prayed enough, now lets get to it!” They’re the ones doing the sacred work of actually taking Jesus to the world.

Every one of us has gifts he or she has been given, as Pauls says, “for the common good.” We need to reverence *every* gift. We need to see the value in *every* gift. The gifts of the head give understanding and wisdom to keep the other gifts of heart and hands in bounds. The gifts of the heart give compassion to the head and the hands. And the gifts of the hands take the head and heart to the world where they can be seen. We’re all parts of the same body and because of that my gifts belong to you just as much as they belong to me and your gifts belong to me just as much as they belong to you. For that reason, if you sit on your gifts and don’t use them, you’re short-changing everyone here—cheating your brothers and sisters. That’s a dangerous thing to do.

The Gospel lesson today serves as a warning not to squander what the Holy Spirit has given us. God is gracious, but he also keeps strict accounts. In our lesson from St. Luke’s Gospel we see Jesus on his final trip to Jerusalem. Looking out over the valley from the Mount of Olives Jesus could see the city spread out before him. Everyone else saw the grandeur of the great city with its great walls and spires and with the temple crowning the top of the hill. And yet Jesus saw something different. While everyone else was thinking how majestic the city looked, Jesus saw through the veneer to the heart. He could see that God’s people had squandered what they had been given.

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19:41-44)

Jesus was deceived by the marble and the gold or by the religiosity of the people living in Jerusalem. He saw right through the material prosperity and the veneer of religion. He saw through the peaceful view to the confusion that was really there underneath it all. Jerusalem—the city whose name means “Peace”—had no real peace inside her walls. God had called these people to himself and for a thousand years they had repeatedly turned away from him. He had called them to holiness, but they were satisfied with superficial religion and with outward acts of piety. Finally, God had sent his Messiah to usher in his kingdom and his people had rejected him. This was Jesus’ last trip to Jerusalem because this time he was going to his own death. And Jesus knew that the Father is a holy judge who holds his people accountable—that’s why Jesus was sent, so that his righteousness could be accounted to humble sinners that they—that we—might not stand condemned before a holy God.

Jesus looked out over Jerusalem and wept because God’s people had squandered the gifts they had been given. At the heart of the city was the temple itself where the worship of God had been exchanged for crass commerce—and not just commerce, but for the fleecing of the people in the name of God himself. The corruption of the temple showed the real state of the people and their nation. Luke says:

And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, saying to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a den of robbers.” And he was teaching daily in the temple. (Luke 19:45-47a)

There are ways in which the today Church isn’t any better than Jerusalem and her temple were when Jesus wept over them. There are preachers and other people out there fleeing God’s people for their own personal profit. There are many churches covered in a thin veneer of piety and holiness that are really dead inside. And yet it’s easy to point fingers and not examine ourselves. God has made us rich with his Spirit. He’s given us time and talent and treasure. He’s enriched us with the wisdom and knowledge of his Word. He’s poured his love into our hearts and given us the experience of his amazing grace. We may not turn his house into a den of robbers. But how often do we rob him by keeping our gifts to ourselves? How often do we rob him by keeping the knowledge he’s given us through the Scripture to ourselves? How often do we rob him by keeping his love to ourselves instead of sharing it with the world around us? How often do we rob him by ignoring his mission or paying it only lip service, while we use the gifts he has given us for our own personal benefit and pleasure. Brothers and sisters, God has saved us by his grace, he has equipped us with his Spirit, now he calls us to use those gifts to give him glory and to take his message of saving grace to a world in need.

Let me conclude with our Old Testament lesson. We read Joshua’s words to the Israelites as they stood ready to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. God had performed signs and wonders and had led them out of their slavery in Egypt. He’d miraculously saved them from the Egyptian army when he led them through the Red Sea on dry ground. And for forty years he had cared for them in the wilderness. He had entered into covenant with them, declaring that he was their God and that they were his people. He had brought them to the place of promise. Now it was up to them to live in faith and to hold up their end of the covenant. They had a choice: they could choose not to trust God and to serve the same idols that had got their parents into trouble, or they could reaffirm their faith in their Saviour, follow him, and put the gifts he had given them to work in his service. As the people gathered before this was Joshua’s charge:

Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and

serve the LORD. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. (Joshua 24:14-15)

Please pray with me: “As we are given the same choice, Father, we ask that you will continue to give us the grace to make the choice to serve you. Remind us always that we have no reason to doubt your promises and every reason to know that you are faithful and true to them. Make us good stewards of both the faith that you have given to us and of the tools you give us to build your Kingdom, and let us always be thankful for the privilege of being your workers and for the grace you give us to persevere to the end. We ask this in the name of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.