

Let's begin this week with a review of what we discussed last week especially with respect to our roadmap for this Trinity season. As previously mentioned, the Trinity season is the season of spiritual growth, and thus our liturgical color is green. Although we don't have an historical record of the rationale behind the prayer book lectionary readings for this season, we do know that they trace back to the early centuries of the Church. About 20 years ago, David Phillips studied the Trinity lesson structure in light of early medieval understandings of spirituality and of how to grow in spiritual maturity. In doing so, he discovered a pattern of three cycles dealing with the seven deadly sins.

The first is the cycle of Purgation. It is focused upon the concrete disciplines of not sinning, or of purging our sins from our character and behavior. The second cycle is that of Illumination. During this step, we examine our hearts, being illuminated by the word of God and by the Holy Spirit, so that we would understand the root desire of our disordered affections. Finally, we come to the cycle of Union. In this phase, we seek to reorder our affections so that they are ultimately directed toward God. We seek to love Him who alone is the most lovely; we seek to love Him who is the essence of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

This three-by-seven pattern then fills twenty one weeks of the typically twenty-four week long Trinity season. Last week and this week, the first two Sundays after Trinity, we are encouraged by the lessons to establish love, and specifically the love of God, as our goal. This is the motivation that we need in order to undertake the disciplines for spiritual growth. Then at the end of Trinitytide, the season wraps up by reminding us of the fullness of joy that we, who pursue God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, will eternally enjoy.

Now if you recall, last week we read Christ's parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which provided for us an example of how we are NOT to be. The epistle last week began, "BELOVED, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." Then in this week's epistle, we read, "But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" The point here is hammered home to us. If we claim to be followers of God, and yet we do not act in love to those around us, then we are lying to the world and lying to ourselves about our love of God. If you want to know what someone really believes, what actually is his fundamental and dearly held values, don't ask them about what they believe, but rather watch how they live. It is easy for a man to say that he loves God and is a Christian. It is difficult to actually live like a Christian, to give one's time, money, and effort, to help others.

Last week, we saw the end of the rich man. We read of him suffering torments in hell because he loved himself more than he loved God. This is the “rod”, as it were. The threat of punishment is an effective motivation for us stubborn human beings, but, especially in modern society, threats lose their effectiveness to motivate. Yes, we acknowledge that hell and its torments are real, and we don’t wish that for anyone. Yet, those torments seem so far off. Such urgent compulsion cannot be maintained very effectively. And besides that, we don’t wish to be obedient merely to escape punishment for the self still resides supreme at the core of this desire. In other words, desiring to avoid punishments is motivated by SELF-preservation.

In ethical formation therefore, we not only need the rod, the stick, as it were. We also need the carrot or the reward. We need to not simply be moving away from something, for in mere avoidance, we will, of course, move in a different, but potentially equally destructive, direction. For this reason, we need to be clear that we are moving towards something. We are moving towards God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and this is the only goal that invigorates our imaginations and holds out the sure promise of something completely good and eternally gratifying; something divinely sublime.

The Bible likens this reward to a marriage feast. Think of the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Revelation. “Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” We think of Ephesians 6, “Husbands love your wives, just as Christ also loves the Church, and gave Himself for her.” The Bible begins with a marriage and it ends in a marriage. Marriage is the analogy of Church, and therefore of Christian life, for it symbolizes our final, corporate, union with God. This is the promised reward to the faithful, and our gospel lesson this morning holds out this reward before us. In doing so, we are asked an implicit question. Will we come to the feast? Or rather will we despise the great man who has invited us?

Now a similar parable is also found in St. Matthew’s gospel. In his version, the feast is explicitly called a wedding feast, but here in our lesson today, St. John focuses only upon the feast itself so, even though all of the marriage imagery is in the background. St. John wants to present it to us primarily as a joyous celebration, a grand party. Who wouldn’t want to come and feast and drink and enjoy the best things? In such celebrations, we forget for a moment the burden of the curse. At these occasions, we are relieved of the burden of earning our bread by the sweat of our brow.

In the parable, the feast is prepared and the servant is dispatched to call those who

were bidden to the festivities. "And they all with one consent began to make excuse." Now the excuses given are not perhaps themselves so bad. In fact, in the Old Testament lesson this morning, they were deemed acceptable. We all exist in a world where we have to feed ourselves by the sweat of our brow. We make important purchases. And we can be surely glad that this one fellow in the Gospel account got married for, as Shakespeare's character Benedick reminds us, "The world must be peopled!" All three excuses given are in fact important and necessary for human well-being. They are real concerns.

But are they the chief concerns? Wouldn't it be wiser to accept the great man's invitation? Wouldn't it be best to enjoy the feast that has been generously prepared? Why would anyone refuse such an invitation? They have flawed priorities. They are so concerned with the cares of this world that they fail to see the joy that has been prepared for them. Perhaps they are comfortably wealthy, or so distracted by the demands and pleasures of this world, that they have no time to prepare for the pleasures of the next.

This is the danger that faced these characters in the parable, and truly, this is the danger that each of us face as well. What are our priorities? How often do we think to ourselves, "I'm busy earning a living. I do enough. I have responsibilities."? Now I am not God, I know not His mind, but yet I cannot help but believe that such sentiments will not excuse us before the Great Judge. The feast is prepared. Will we come, partake, and rejoice at the plenteousness and goodness of the feast? Or will we make excuses? The banquet will be furnished with guests. Be sure that you are one of them.

Specifically this morning, we are talking about feasting on a deeper relationship with God as is fitting for the season of Trinity. We should long to grow in holiness and in Christlikeness now, so that we more deeply experience the divine presence, the infinite love, of God more fully in this life. And let us be reminded that all of the joys and pleasures of this world point us to their ultimate fulfillment in the next. The feast is for now, but it is continuous with the feast to be had in the future. For now, our joys are moments. But then, they will be eternal. Growth in holiness therefore makes us more ready for eternity.

Now we together here this morning may surely with one assent proclaim boldly that the feast is both prepared and plentiful. But still we must come to grips with the fact that the master of the feast does not chase us down and force feed us. We have a decision to make. Every one who calls himself a believer in Jesus Christ must decide to turn from the demands of this world, momentarily but regularly, in order to participate in what God has given us. The one who does not do so, exposes the fact that he values his faith cheaply. If we do not

value the feast, that is the pursuit of holiness and the rewards of life in Christ, or if we do not trust God to provide for us, then we will refuse the invitation. So this is the question, the challenge, set before us today. Do you want to know God's love more intimately? Then pursue holiness, learn obedience, endeavor to become more intimate with God, and God will be faithful to reveal Himself more fully to you. In knowing Him more deeply, we will experience greater joy, even here and now in the midst of such a troubled world. Christ, the grounding of our hope, is not shaken by the chaos around us.

Yet let us not over-simplify this task either. Making the decision to prioritize our relationship with Christ is the first step, but of course there is effort required. Not only must we have the vision of where we wish to go, but we must execute on the plan to get us there, and this is no easy journey. According to the epistle, we live in a hostile world. "Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you." Like the psalmist, we must pass through many dangers, we must pass through the valley of the shadow of death. The world is arrayed against us on our journey. There will be distractions and dangers and rejections along the way. But let us never forget the reward that awaits for us at the end of this journey. The feast is prepared for us to enjoy, and enjoy it we shall.

Next week we begin the cycle of purgation, and we will discuss the sin of pride. For this week, in your prayers and meditations, I encourage you to contemplate the love of God for us in Christ. We just spent half of the year walking through the love that Christ has demonstrated for us by all of the works of redemption wrought by Him on our behalf. "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us." Christ has opened the way to God. Let us not turn from the trail that He has blazed.

And now, in this moment, let us prepare for a foretaste of that final eternal feast, feeding on Him, being reminded of His love and, in return, dedicating ourselves once again to the task that is set before us.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.