

This morning, we continue on with the Illumination cycle of our series on the seven deadly sins. During this cycle we focus upon one of the classical virtues to counter each of the sins that we previously discussed during the Purgation cycle. As a brief review, we looked at pride, a sin of the mind based on the implicit belief that the self is of greater importance than God. Pride is countered by faith, and specifically faith in correct doctrines revealed to us in scripture and preserved for us in the church. We have to submit to the truth, which requires us to set aside our pride. In the power of our new life in Christ and by His Holy Spirit, we must intellectually will that we live by the Truth of God against the sinful inclinations of natural man.

Last week we also discussed that Christian love is the virtue that opposes vainglory and envy, which sins exalt the self over our neighbors, other people which we encounter in our daily lives. Love forgets the self and instead is focused upon the needs and well-being of others. This, like faith, is not a primarily emotional response. Of course, all of life is accompanied by emotions we experience on a daily basis, but such virtues as faith, love, and hope, stem first from a belief in the right things and then a determined decision to act in the right way, according to the right things. As followers of Christ, we must put others before ourselves because Christ put us before Himself. He suffered for the sake of others showing us what true love is. We now are called to sacrifice in both small and large ways, to love each other and humanity in general. There is no room here for the Christian to be grasping from other people or to be petty in our behavior, envious of what others have that we want.

Today we discuss the theological virtue of hope which opposes the sin of dejection, also known as accidie. As mentioned earlier in this series, dejection is a discouragement that maintains a sense of powerlessness at one's core. We begin to believe that all of our efforts

avail nothing, that our actions change nothing, that they do not improve our lives or the lives of others and that they cannot change the course of this world at all. Now many of the larger problems and injustices of the world can be a great discouragement to us. They are extremely difficult to change and therefore overwhelm us with this sense. Besides this, other misguided people will be working against us to maintain the status quo, for they are shaped by sin instead of being shaped by the Holy Spirit into righteousness and holiness.

But knowing that God works in us and through us to accomplish His will is the basis for hope. Hope itself is not just wishful thinking. It is the conviction that God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year. Because dejection is more of an emotive response instead of a response based upon intellectual propositions, we locate this sin more in the heart or chest, the seat of emotions. Although hope begins with the Truth of God, that He loves us and is using us to draw all men to Himself, even using our suffering and pain to build His kingdom, hope must not remain in the life of the mind, but must become embodied. Hope is that positive disposition that knows in our hearts, that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose. Hope is that confidence that looks at the problems of the world and yet still says, "Maybe I can't tackle it all, but I can work to do right by my family, my church, my neighbors." Hope is that courage that does what is right and difficult, not because it will automatically fix the problems, but because it is good and right so to do. We do things that may seem futile to the world, because it honors God. Be assured that God not only sees all of those little anonymous acts of service and devotion to Him, those prayers offered in solitude, those good deeds done in secret, that time when you hauled the grocery cart all the way back to store-front from that furthest spot in the parking lot out of a conviction that the next person would need that cart; but that those acts done in the love of God make a real difference in this world. Hope is our faith in God

motivated by love of God, put into action, lived out in and before the world.

We filter this world through the eyes of our daily experience which tells us that our agency is limited and impotent. Christian hope, however, requires us to acknowledge that all agency – the ability to change the world – ultimately belongs to God. We desire things to work out in certain ways. We think that God should just make everything perfect and take away all of the bad things in this world, but to do so would rob us of the agency which has been delegated to us by God. If God did not permit evil, then we would be prevented from disobeying Him. But this also means that we could not of our own wills love God or obey God. Compulsion precludes true obedience, true love. Therefore the struggle in the world will not go away, and we should not wish it to go away. There will always be great problems in the world that must be overcome because mankind is fallen.

But God tells us to rest all of our hopes upon Him so let us not live in dejection. “Be careful [anxious] for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6,7). In the confidence of hope, we are to persist in prayer even when our daily experience tells us that prayer accomplishes nothing, even when we are discouraged and feel like our prayers are impotent. Even when we are afflicted by dejection, by the spirit that says, “vanity, vanity, all is vanity.” In hope, we persist in obedience, even when all of our efforts seem to have fallen flat on their faces. God is the One responsible for the outcomes. Trust God to do His part. Be thankful and be quick to do your part of obedience. Our loving obedience to God changes the world even when we are blind to the impacts of our efforts.

The collect this morning begins by stating that the Almighty and Everlasting God is always more ready to hear than we are to pray and that He will give us more than we desire or deserve. Our prayers will be answered. Sometimes the answer is, "No." But more often, the answer is, "Yes, but you can't see yet how I am answering." Or, "Trust me; I am providing as is best." The collect continues by asking God to pour upon us His abundant mercy and to give us those things which we ask only because we have been made children of God in Jesus Christ. We ask that God would answer us abundantly, and hope confirms to us that He will do just that.

It was hope that prompted the friends of the deaf, speechless, man in our gospel reading to bring him to Jesus. Now were they completely confident that Christ would heal their friend? Likely not. They knew how the world worked. They knew that such defects did not miraculously go away. But having heard about Jesus, they brought their friend anyway. Hope does not need to be perfect. In fact, it is only perfected through long-term, through life-long, obedience. Eugene Peterson wrote a book entitled *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an instant Society*. I like that title. We constantly look for instant fulfillment. Sometime Jesus answers in this way. He often did when he walked with us on earth, and sometimes He still answers in an immediate and dramatic way. But most of the time, He just asks us to persist in Trusting Him, to persist in obeying Him, to know that He is in control and that He is working through our obedience.

Christ healed that deaf and dumb man, but He did so because the friends brought him to Jesus. Their obedience, their faith, love, and hope, was used by God to glorify Jesus Christ who does all things well. In a very real sense, the healed man became a new person. He was dead, in a sense, because of the defects introduced into the world because of humanity's sin.

But Jesus comes to turn around the death of sin. He restores all things, and this man who was healed by the touch and command of Jesus, was born again, a sign that the Kingdom of God was at Hand.

Had the friends not brought this man, then he would have remained in a soundless world, isolated from others, unable to respond to friends and family, unable to make his thoughts and wishes known. Yet these friends became able ministers to this man, in bringing Him, who could not have come on his own, to Jesus. These men did not do the healing themselves, of course, but they had heard about Jesus and hoped in Him, exercised their agency to fix what was defective, and their hope in God was rewarded.

We've noted before that all good things are ultimately from God. But God has endowed us, particularly those of us who have responded with faith to the Word of God, with the ability to love or to hate, to choose Him or to turn from Him, to obey or to disobey. In ourselves, we lack the authority to remake the world to our desire, and we lack the wisdom to ever wield such authority to good ends, but Christ has both the wisdom and the authority to redeem the world through us. The friends of the deaf man were able ministers to him, bringing him to new life. St. Paul in the epistle lesson says that God, in His infinite sufficiency, also makes us able ministers of the New Testament, the New Covenant cut in the sacrifice and shedding of the precious blood of Jesus. Our sufficiency is of Christ, and is only of Christ. In Him all things are redeemed and united to God. In Him, our hope is well-placed. We too, will not be disappointed. We may be called upon to endure hardships and to suffer, but never forget that Christ suffered for us. Christ redeems the world. Our perseverance in faith, hope, and love, through our suffering is used of God to redeem the world. We are ambassadors to the world, able ministers because our sufficiency is of God.

This morning, we read about Jesus giving new life to this deaf man. But also, let us not underestimate the miracle that we have witnessed just a few minutes ago. We saw Seanna and the children given new life in the kingdom of God, in the family of God. Ward, Laverne, and Michael, along with the godparents and sponsors, have been able ministers, bringing these individuals to the healing waters of baptism. What a picture for us of what we should all do, of what we should all desire for our friends and family and acquaintances. Let these miracles, both those we read of in scripture and those that we witness right here in our midst, always remind us that our labor is not meaningless. Our prayers are not ignored. Our hope is not misplaced. The Kingdom advances.

Left up to ourselves, I am convinced that we would lose hope, that we would, in deed, fall into the sin of dejection. But the Spirit in our hearts leads us continually back to Christ, back to prayer, back to faithfulness to the covenant made in our baptisms, bringing us along day by day, ultimately to glory.

This is our final hope and our destiny. We certainly have a pilgrimage to complete here on this earth, but our final destination is the fulfillment of the deepest longing of our hearts. Our hope in Christ confirms to us that we, each one of us, are loved by God. In Christ, and particularly at his table, God pours upon us the abundance of His mercy, and He gives us more than we desire or deserve.

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