

We begin today with a little bit of calendar bookkeeping. Today is the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity. In a typical year this would be followed by the Sunday next before Advent. Sometimes the Trinity season is shorter, but this year it is longer, so we have 25 Sundays after Trinity and then the Sunday next before Advent. If you turn to page 224 in the prayer book, then you may note there are no propers specifically defined for the 25<sup>th</sup> or the 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity. What we do in these cases is set in the rubric at the bottom of the page. Next Sunday, the 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday, we will use the propers for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany. In rare years, there may be even another Sunday in which case the propers for these last two Sundays before the Sunday next before Advent would be the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Sundays after Epiphany. When we have a long Trinity, that usually implies that we have a shorter Epiphany season so we don't need to worry about repeating a Sunday's propers in a given year.

Now at the end of Trinity season, we have wrapped up the three cycles on the seven deadly sins, and this week is somewhat of a conclusion to our series. To begin, I would like you to ask yourselves, "Have I grown in this season, through this series?" Now this is not an easy question to answer. Change happens imperceptibly, and perhaps a summer is too short of a time for us to evaluate ourselves fairly. Maybe go back a couple of years and ask yourself some questions. Where was I then? Where am I today? What spiritual struggles do I face? Am I making progress in conquering those struggles?

Maybe we should frame this in a different way. Where am I still hurt? What wounds have I that don't seem to go away? What are those mysterious rooms of my soul where I refuse to go, where I refuse to let Christ in to bring healing, order, and peace? How can I know myself better so that, by God's love and grace, I can be better? To delve into these questions requires courage and quietness. But may I encourage you today, to do just that, to delve into these

questions. Don't fear to be like Jacob wrestling with the Angel of God and holding on to Him even when wounded, even when in pain.

Understand that this process takes time. In this life we never reach the perfection that those who have died in the faith reach. Our experience with Jesus is not face to face. But that doesn't mean that we do not make progress or that we stop trying. It doesn't mean that we don't approach the perfection of love in Christ if we pursue it. What we must come to understand is that progress is painful. The struggles of our lives are required for us to grow spiritually. Let us also understand, that this isn't a hidden principle. It is a well-known axiom from the extensive experience of humanity as revealed in the holy scripture.

From Psalm 66, we read today:

7 O praise our God, ye peoples, \* and make the voice of his praise to be heard;

8 Who holdeth our soul in life; \* and suffereth not our feet to slip.

9 For thou, O God, hast proved us; \* thou also hast tried us, like as silver is tried.

10 Thou broughtest us into the snare; \* and laidest trouble upon our loins.

11 Thou sufferedst men to ride over our heads;

\* we went through fire and water, and thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place.

12 I will go into thine house with burnt-offerings, and will pay thee my vows,

\* which I promised with my lips, and spake with my mouth, when I was in trouble.

The sense here is that God is good even though life is hard, even though He allows us to struggle. Maybe we would even say that God is good because life is hard. He holds our soul in life and suffers not our feet to slip. We are refined and purified in our struggles, but we keep hold upon God. The end of this? That we come into the house of God with our offerings, we worship Him.

Likewise in the Old Testament lesson today from the end of the third and beginning of the fourth chapters of the prophet Malachi, we read of the struggles of those who fear God, while the wicked seem to be comfortable and well. But we also read in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 4,

“For behold, the day is coming, Burning like an oven,

And all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble.

And the day which is coming shall burn them up,”

Says the LORD of hosts, “That will leave them neither root nor branch.

But to you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise

With healing in His wings; And you shall go out And grow fat like stall-fed calves.

So there is a judgment coming for all men. The reward, however, goes to those who remain faithful and persevere through the struggles, those who do not give up even when God seems to hide his face from us. It is through struggle that we are perfected. It is through trials that we truly learn to love God with all of our hearts, with all of our souls, and with all of our minds. This doesn't happen quickly. It takes time. Spiritual growth is hard. It requires long-term determination and grit.

It is important to note the connection between sin and sickness, between sin and death, which has long been recognized by the church. We see this explicitly in the General Epistle of St. James in chapter 5. Beginning at verse 13:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

As descendants of Adam, we inherit his fallen nature. We are both afflicted with sin, as it were a disease, and we also willingly participate in that sin. We are both diseased and culpable. We must pass through forgiveness on our road to health and well-being. Therefore we confess continually, and we continually receive the health that Christ gives us by our relationship to Him and by the sacraments which He has ordained for us to bring us to wholeness.

In today's gospel, we read of two stories of healing. From the parallel accounts of these miracles in other gospels, we learn that the girl was twelve years old. We also note that this woman has been bleeding for twelve years. It is important that we not gloss over this fact. Twelve years is a long time to be afflicted with an injury or such an illness. Twelve is a number of completeness – we immediately think of the twelve tribes of Israel which is the fullness of the Old Testament people of God. We think of the twelve disciples which is the fullness of the New Testament people of God. So the number twelve in this story can be taken to represent all of God's people suffering affliction.

First we have the young – those who cannot represent themselves to God, but rely on their parents to bring Jesus to them. In our tradition we think of those who are brought to baptism by their parents, who find salvation because of the faith of another. Then we have adults, who are likewise afflicted with death, but yet must come to Jesus on their own for healing and salvation. Regardless, the fullness of God's people remain afflicted by sin and therefore by sickness and death.

But in this story, the number twelve is referring to a length of time. We may think of this as representing a lifetime or perhaps generational suffering. This twelve-year-old girl could

have been the daughter of the woman. The birth of the girl could have been the beginning of the woman's bleeding. We inherit our sinful natures. It does not go away, we do not experience healing until we come to Jesus, until we reach out in faith and touch the hem of His robe, until He takes us by the hand and bids us arise.

The point is that in Jesus, we are healed – first inwardly our sins and the effects of sins are removed, but then outwardly there is also blessing and healing to be found in Christ. There is our joy, as the redeemed people of God that begins here and now, even though our outward man decays until, if Christ carries, we face bodily death. We shall not, however, forget that as Christ has been raised from death, so we too, will be raised from death to eternal life. As our bodies in this life fail us, we hold on with ever greater fervor for the body we shall have that will be completely free from the death of sin. That life is for us now spiritually, but we must embrace the new life and put off the sin. This is what our series this summer has been about. I pray that we have become more greatly aware of the sin in our lives that must be put to death so that we would live into the new life that we have, even now, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the epistle this morning, we note this same struggle for the first generation of believers. In this lesson, the Apostle Paul prayed for spiritual growth and continued healing for the Colossian church.

For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness; giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of

the inheritance of the saints in light.

It is interesting that the Apostle began his letter praising the Colossians for very similar things. Of them he had heard a good report. But there were more trials and growth to be had. There were more healing and joy to be had. As believers, we have been healed from sin and disease, but there will always be challenges living in a fallen world. These challenges will continue to mold and shape us until that day when we shall have attained that for which we have striven. God the Father hath made us meet partaker of the inheritance of the saints of light. They persevered in their struggles, and our struggles are therefore a gift to us. Our job is to persevere in the faith, to hold on to Jesus no matter what may come. This is the mark of a true saint. God grant us grace not only to rise to this challenge, but also to discover the joy that is to be found in life's challenges!

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