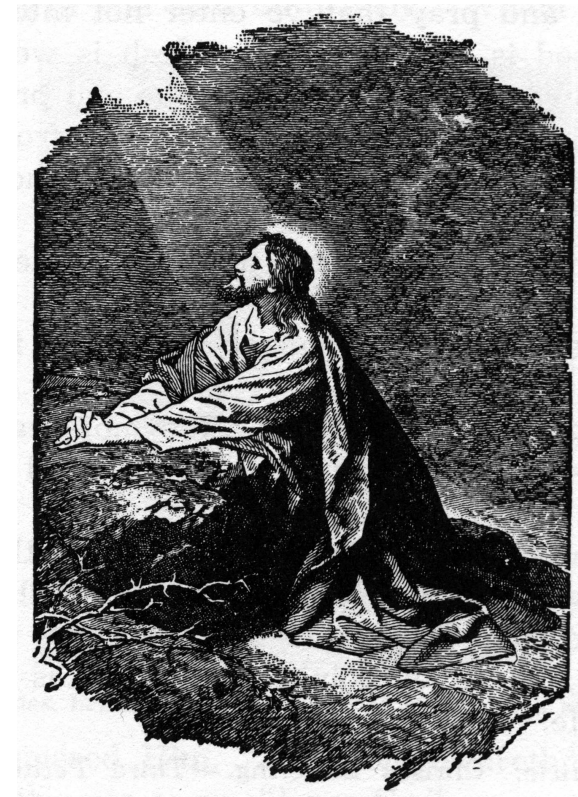


The Holy Ghost has St. John set forth things that are always true and are needed in every parish in every age. “The Elect Lady and Her children” is an address fitting for the whole Church and the members thereof, and it is equally as fitting for every particular parish, as each congregation is simply The Church in that location.

For the Church throughout the world and in every particular location, it is fitting that there be no diminishing of the coming of the Christ in the flesh; such diminution is the mark of deceivers and antichrists. Whether it be by Rome’s devaluing of Christ in the Flesh by making His once-for-all sacrifice less than what is necessary to pay for our sins, or by the denial of the Reformed and Armenians that His flesh is truly present in His holy Supper for all to eat and to drink (so that those who do so unworthily are guilty of His Body and Blood, 1 Corinthians 11:27) and is of no benefit to us anyway, we see from John’s words that the spirit of antichrist is being manifested.

Such theologies are to have no place at the Lord’s Table and, therefore, are not to be bid Godspeed or welcomed by us or allowed to claim to be our missionaries, and so forth, as groups like the Gideons do. Instead, we are to show true love to them and to one another by insisting on the pure teaching of God in the Flesh to save sinners.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



SEPTEMBER 2011

(TRINITY 14—TRINITY 19)

The Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America

THE HOLY GOSPEL St. Luke 17:11-19 (NKJV)

Now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. And they lifted up their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

So when He saw them, He said to them, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed.

And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan.

So Jesus answered and said, “Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?”

And He said to him, “Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well.”

The COLLECT

Keep, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy Church with Thy perpetual mercy; and because the frailty of man without Thee cannot but fall, keep us ever by Thy help from all things hurtful and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

We who trust in God the Son have within us the witness of God. That is, we have His Word and we believe it. Further, as we have seen in this week’s readings, we see that this Word of God “works on us” so that we desire not to hate our brothers, but to keep His commandments—not that we do so as we ought, as we must never think that we are without sin this side of Heaven, but the forgiveness He gives us causes us to see His Word, ourselves, and other people in a different light.

This is because we are now made alive in Christ Jesus. As He taught in the third chapter of St. John’s Gospel, we have been born anew through Holy Baptism, and, thus, we have eternal life as our present possession. Having the greatest possession in the world changes our outlook. We see Man differently, and we see God far differently. Now we know that our Lord hears our prayers, because He considers us no longer to be sinning; Jesus is so perfectly our Substitute that when we pray in accord with God’s will the Father hears Jesus.

This is the counterpart to Holy Absolution, in which, when the pastor speaks the words, we hear not just a man, but the voice of the Triune God. It is in such a recognition that we are kept from idols: we see that we are not worthy of Heaven on our own and that our comfort is not really in our pastor, but in the God who uses our pastor.

Our reception of the forgiveness of sins gives us something to give our fellow man: that same forgiveness. Having that forgiveness in common, we are able to have fellowship with one another, as that is what fellowship is in the Bible: holding onto the same faith, having Christ and His Word in common. Recognizing that fellow believers in Christ are our brothers in Christ, John says that we will want what is best for them, that we will love them as God loves them. Thus, we will not want them to call God a liar, but to confess their sins, and to help them with this, we will want to treasure both the Law and the Gospel, using them each in their proper role, so that they will trust in Jesus' sacrifice as payment for their sins, and so that their confidence is in His atonement alone.

We are to keep and treasure God's commandments. That is, we are to avow them as being far above what our fleshly nature would choose as rules for living. Even though we do not do as they say anywhere near perfectly, we still say that it is the commandments that are right, and we are wrong . . . that being "born this way" (sinful and unclean) is no excuse and doesn't set His commandments aside, as many in the world today wish to claim. Instead, we confess that these are not grievous even though our flesh judges them so because of our inability to live up to them. We sinners even treasure them . . . because they remind us of how much we need Jesus.

"For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict."

Moreover, since for the preservation of pure doctrine and for thorough, permanent, godly unity in the Church it is necessary, not only that the pure, wholesome doctrine be rightly presented, but also that the opponents who teach otherwise be reproved, 1 Tim. 3 (2 Tim. 3:16); Titus 1:9,—for faithful shepherds, as Luther says, should do both, namely, feed or nourish the lambs and resist the wolves, so that the sheep may flee from strange voices, John 10:12, and may separate the precious from the vile, Jer. 15:19,—Therefore we have thoroughly and clearly declared ourselves to one another, also regarding these matters, as follows: that a distinction should and must by all means be observed between unnecessary and useless wrangling, on the one hand, whereby the Church ought not to be disturbed, since it destroys more than it builds up, and necessary controversy, on the other hand, as, when such a controversy occurs as involves the articles of faith or the chief heads of the Christian doctrine, where for the defense of the truth the false opposite doctrine must be reproved. (FC SD, Rule & Norm, 14-15).

“. . . that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself [His] own special people, zealous for good works.”

Thus faith is a divine work in us, that changes us and regenerates us of God, and puts to death the old Adam, makes us entirely different men in heart, spirit, mind, and all powers, and brings with it the Holy Ghost. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, powerful thing that we have in faith, so that it is impossible for it not to do good without ceasing. Nor does it ask whether good works are to be done; but before the question is asked, it has wrought them, and is always engaged in doing them. But he who does not do such works is void of faith, and gropes and looks about after faith and good works, and knows neither what faith nor what good works are, yet babbles and prates with many words concerning faith and good works. Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain that a man would die a thousand times for it. And this trust and knowledge of divine grace renders joyful, fearless, and cheerful towards God and all creatures, which the Holy Ghost works through faith; and on account of this, man becomes ready and cheerful, without coercion, to do good to everyone, to serve every one, and to suffer everything for love and praise to God, who has conferred this grace on him, so that it is impossible to separate works from faith, yea, just as impossible as it is for heat and light to be separated from fire. (FC SD IV.9-12).

John here encourages us not to love the world that is passing away, nor the things in it, but to walk as Christ walked. Keeping our focus off of the things of this world, we see that there is no reason to sin; instead, we see that everlasting holiness is God's gift to us in Christ Jesus, that the love of God is perfected in us by His Word being our treasure.

John speaks of keeping God's commandments and of keeping God's Word as parallel things, even though we know that the Word and the commandments aren't fully synonyms. He speaks this way because we cannot fully keep His Word without maintaining the commandments, nor are we capable of keeping the commandments without treasuring His Word. That is, unless we treasure God's commands as expressing the holiness that Man was created to live in, we will not see how greatly we fall short of them and have need of treasuring His Word of promise, trusting in God the Son to be the propitiation—the atoning sacrifice—for all of our sins. Again, seeing that atonement, we are more readily able to confess all of our sins, since we see that confessing them and trusting solely in the grace of God for Jesus' sake gives Him all glory.

John tells us that if we hate our brother, we stumble and get lost. Instead, we are to love our fellow sinner and show him our Propitiator, that we might walk together in true fellowship without stumbling.

Fellowship is a “top down” proposition. One who is in the darkness cannot initiate fellowship with one who is in the Light—much less with One Who is the Light. That is because fellowship, in the Biblical sense, is not based upon any sort of negotiation or compromise, but upon having and holding something in common. For one who has the Word of Life, it is certain that no fellowship that means giving up even a little finger’s hold on that Word of Life can even be considered.

John clearly states that the Apostles—those who had heard, seen, looked upon, and had tangible experience with Jesus—must declare what they had received if we were ever to be placed in the same relationship with God as that which they enjoyed for Jesus’ sake. Since we have received God’s Word from them (and the eternal life it gives), we have no need to receive darkness once again, but only to walk in the Light.

Such walking in the Light entails admitting about ourselves what is most painful, so that the cure for that pain may be applied: we must admit continuously that we are sinners, so that we do not spurn the forgiveness of sins from our gracious God, but gladly receive it and be cleansed from all our unrighteousness. As we do this, we are also reflecting God’s Light to our fellow men. When they see that we are not afraid to confess, since we receive forgiveness, perhaps they will also stop calling God a liar, confess, and receive what He generously gives in Christ: forgiveness and fellowship with Himself and with His Church.

“Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you.”

Thus we have two kinds of fathers presented in this commandment, fathers in blood and fathers in office, or those to whom belongs the care of the family, and those to whom belongs the care of the country. Besides these there are yet spiritual fathers; not like those in the Papacy, who have indeed had themselves called thus, but have performed no function of the paternal office. For those only are called spiritual fathers who govern and guide us by the Word of God; as St. Paul boasts his fatherhood 1 Cor. 4:15, where he says: In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel. Now, since they are fathers they are entitled to their honor, even above all others. But here it is bestowed least; for the way which the world knows for honoring them is to drive them out of the country and to grudge them a piece of bread, and, in short, they must be (as says St. Paul, 1 Cor. 4:13) as the filth of the world and everybody’s refuse and footrag. Yet there is need that this also be urged upon the populace, that those who would be Christians are under obligation in the sight of God to esteem them worthy of double honor who minister to their souls, that they deal well with them and provide for them. For that, God is willing to add to you sufficient blessing and will not let you come to want. (LC I. 158-161).

THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. Matthew 6:24–34 (NKJV)

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

“Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?

“Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

“Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?

“So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

The COLLECT

Lord, we beseech Thee, let Thy continual pity cleanse and defend Thy Church; and because it cannot continue in safety without Thy help, preserve it evermore by Thy help and goodness; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. Matthew 9:1-8 (NKJV)

So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed.

When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.”

And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, “This Man blasphemes!”

But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins; then He said to the paralytic, ‘Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’”

And he arose and departed to his house. Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.

The COLLECT

O almighty and most merciful God, of Thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech Thee, from all things that may hurt us, that we, being ready, both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things that Thou wouldst have done; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

“Faith without works is dead.” This phrase always scares me, for I never feel I have ever done enough works to prove that I have the faith required in that phrase. How many people in need have I passed by, and not only because I had no way to help them, but also because I didn’t want to help them for I thought they were trying to pull a fast on me, or trying to take advantage of me in some way, or I didn’t help them because I was too frightened to offer my assistance; to get involved. According to St. James, I have failed miserably and am dead in my sins and trespasses.

But there is hope. For in repentance I can cling to the works of my Lord Jesus Christ, for I know that even though I have failed terribly in my vocation and office to fulfill the second table of the Law to love my neighbor, I am covered with His works of redemption for me through my Holy Baptism.

He, knowing that we all fail completely when it comes to fulfilling the Law, left His glory in Heaven, to humble Himself to put on our flesh, and suffer our life, so that He might fulfill the Law perfectly for us, and suffer and die our punishment on the holy Cross.

Therefore, clothed with His righteousness on account of our Holy Baptism, we can cling in faith to His holy works, and out of love for Him, and by the assistance of the Holy Ghost, see our faith in Him being made perfect through our good works.

What good are “good works”? How can they be “profitable”, as Paul tells us here, if salvation is by grace alone? Aren’t we told that “grace ceases to be grace” if it’s not 100%? How can man, who’s supposed to be spiritually “dead as a doornail”, going to produce something that’s “good”?

Well, consider the context of this passage. No doubt Titus was one of Paul’s converts, as he addresses him as “a true son in our common faith” in the letter’s introduction in chapter 1. Paul was writing this epistle to Titus as one fully aware of the importance of getting a good start with the fledgling Christian church in Crete. He says in that same chapter 1: “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you”. Therefore, the example that Titus would set would be crucial. And the elders that Titus would appoint would be equally critical to the mission of Christ’s church.

So what’s the “value” of good works that Paul exhorts Titus to be “careful to maintain”? Jesus tells us in Matthew 5: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” The good works of Titus and his fellow elders are the consequence of their faith, not the cause.

Salvation is by grace alone. But once saved, the Christ who dwells in us propels us to do the works that witness to others. And that combination—of “works and witness”—certainly does give glory to our Father in heaven.

“Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.”

The book of Philemon is unusual. First, it’s quite short—containing only one chapter. In fact, in your reading today, you read a whole book of the Bible! But this book is also unusual because of its contents. Paul is asking his friend Philemon to receive back his runaway slave—a man named Onesimus. And to have this man received back in good standing, Paul addresses His friend Philemon “out of love’s sake”. He knows that Philemon has every right under Roman law to do as he pleases with a slave. But Paul reminds Philemon that he himself is a slave—a slave of Jesus Christ. And with Christ as our Master, the rules of life change. We no longer exercise our “rights”, but we do what is right—right in the sight of God. And that “doing” is motivated by love, not by law. May we all be living our lives in the spirit of sacrificial love, even as Christ has first loved us.

“My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.”

“Do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . with partiality.” What is partiality? It is to show favor to one over another. Holy Scripture tells us that our Lord does not show partiality. What that means is that our Lord loves each one in His creation equally.

However, mankind is notorious for showing partiality. The world loves a good man, or rather, a man who does works that the world deems to be good. The world esteems the rich and famous, the well dressed, and the well mannered.

The Church is not to show the same favoritism that the world does. For the world truly despises the lowly, the humble, and the poor. Even when they give the appearance of care for the poor, it is really so that they can change them from being poor into being rich, famous, well dressed and well mannered individuals, like themselves.

Our Lord, however, would have us not be concerned with our station in this life, but would rather have us concerned with His Word and faith. He wants us to have complete faith in Him to supply our wants and needs. And when we have this faith, we tend not to see people according to what earthly possessions they have or don’t have, but we see their spiritual possessions. Therefore, when we see how other people struggle with sin in the same way that we do, we are led to show mercy and forgiveness to them, and treat them as our equal.

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.”

Perseverance amidst suffering and trials has been a theme of the pericopes this week. Today, the brother of our Lord, St. James, the first bishop of Jerusalem, in his Epistle to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, begins this Epistle with a reminder to remain faithful in the midst of trial and testing of our faith.

St. James tells us that when our faith is tested, it produces patience. In the Greek the word translated as patience, literally means “to suffer for a long time,” and we see this word translated in other places as “long-suffering.” This is what patience is, it is the ability to suffer through things; it is endurance.

Suffering and hardship are not easy things to endure. Especially when it is our faith that is being tested through it, for it produces doubt. Doubt produces temptation. Temptation can lead to sin. And sin leads to eternal death.

Our Lord God does not want this for us, but He allows us to be handed over the evilness of our own desires, so that we might have opportunity to prove our faithfulness and love to Him. However, when we fall—and we often do—He would have us to gain wisdom through our failing in temptation, so that we might be lead to repentance, and cling not to our dead works, but to the works of our Lord Jesus Christ, and seek forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation in Him alone.

“God, . . . has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

Right from the start, the author of this letter directs our attention to Jesus Christ. There’s no flowery greeting, no long introduction, just an arrow that points to Christ. He does acknowledge the long and glorious string of prophets, through which God spoke in the Old Testament. But he does so only that that we may appreciate all the more that God now speaks directly through His Son.

But note that Jesus has not come to repair or replace what’s gone before, but to fulfill—to complete—what’s been promised since Eden’s garden. As Moses had said in Deuteronomy: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear”

So this Jesus is no ordinary prophet. This isn’t God “saving the best guy for last”. Jesus is no comparison to what’s gone before. As we hear in today’s text, He’s the One through Whom the world came into being. He’s not a representative of God, He’s the “express image” of God, by Whom all things hold together—and who holds sway even over sin.

“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.”

Why did he do it? Why would he give up so much? He had everything going for him: great job, promising future; a respected doctor in the community. And what does he do with it? He gives it all away, and moves to Africa to give out free medical care. It doesn't make sense. He had it all, but gave it all away.

The Second Person of the Trinity also had “much going for Him.” Having His home in the glories of heaven, He had no reason to give up all that was His. No reason, that is, except us. His great love for man—and pity for what man had done—compelled Christ to abandon all, even life itself, for our sake. As we confess in the Nicene Creed: “who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate.” Let us never cease to marvel, and boldly confess, the all-surpassing love of Christ—which manifested itself in the greatest sacrifice the world will ever know.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines.”

The verse above supports one of the key doctrines that support proper Christological theology: our Lord Jesus Christ does not change. This is referred to as the “immutability” of Christ. Again, this means that He does not change; He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Therefore, the Epistle to the Hebrews states next, “Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines.” In other words, just as our Lord Jesus Christ is unchanging, so too is His Word and doctrines.

So then, when people make claims that our Lord no longer teaches certain doctrines, or that certain teachings of the Apostles were “only for that time and culture,” do not “be carried about” by them, that is, mark and avoid them as false teachers and heretics.

Upholding the truth and purity of God's Word and demanding that the man of God who has charge over you not teach false doctrine, or just as bad, not rebuke false doctrine and false teachers which may be in your midst is how one let's brotherly love continue. It is also how we remember and obey those who rule over us. For all those who are called by our Lord Jesus Christ, are called to remain faithful to Him. And when they show themselves faithless, it is our duty and responsibility to call them back to faithfulness, and if they will not, to flee from them, and find a shepherd who will remain faithful. For we are all subject under the One True Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.”

Just as the Old Testament patriarchs endured suffering and hardship, foreshadowing the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ, we too endure “hostility from sinners” and the “chastening of the Lord.” Hebrews tells us plainly that our Lord chastens and scourges everyone whom He loves; that those who are without chastening are illegitimate and not sons of the inheritance.

Now, first of all, this does not mean that we have to always be going through chastening and scourging, in the same way that you would not continuously chasten and scourge your children, especially when they are well-behaved. What Hebrews is referring to when it speaks about illegitimate sons are those who for the sake of their bellies, fear of suffering, or just plain unfaithfulness to the Lord, shun away from rebuke and chastising. Simply put, they are those who would rather forsake the pure teaching of the Word of God, and the right administration of the Sacraments, than endure the loss of their position in the world.

Such illegitimate sons lack faith, for they are not willing to endure the sufferings that all those who hold fast to the pure Word of God will endure. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us endure the race that is set out before us and cling to our Lord Jesus Christ and His holy Word.

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

“Don’t worry, this kind of thing happens to all of us.” “I know exactly what you’re going through”. Ever been on the “business end” of such comments—immediately after a tragedy has befallen you? How did such words make you feel? Most of us would be offended at such “canned” phrases. But that resentment wouldn’t be a result of overused words. Rather, they’re tough to swallow because “this kind of thing”—does not happen to “all of us”. Each situation is unique. Additionally, others do not know what we’re going through. Only we can vouch for what’s going on inside of us.

But there is One—who does know—who does care—who does act. Christ became One of us that He may serve as our replacement in life and death. And in doing so, He fully experienced the human condition—same as we. So when we cry out in anguish, He not only listens, He understands. And He says not to worry, for weeping endures only for a night, but joy will come in the morning. That’s the bonus of having Jesus as our High Priest. One who sympathizes with our weakness—and does something about it. Thanks be to God that the debt of sin has been paid, and we stand to reap the full benefit in heaven.

“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits.”

Now the author is ready to build—to construct. But he doesn’t “move on”, as if what went before should be pushed aside and forgotten. Quite the contrary. He’s already laid the foundation of Christian doctrine—of things like repentance and faith—and now it’s time to build on what we know.

This is a natural progression. As God’s people, we should always have a desire to know more about the God who created, redeemed, and sanctified us. St Peter says in his first letter: “. . . as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.”

And what things shall we study? Not anything we choose, but what is pleasing in God’s sight. Namely, the teachings we find in the “pure milk of the word”. Things like original sin, the personhood of Christ, the doctrine of election. These, and many more topics, provide more than a lifetime of theological education for pastor and laity alike. May we never grow tired of studying everything from man in his futility to God in His glory. For only in this way can we better appreciate the immense bridge Jesus Christ built to span that great gap.

“And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.”

Faith is defined as the hope of things not seen. Abraham, when our Lord God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac, had faith that God could raise him from the dead. But even more so, Abraham had faith that God would deliver to his seed the promised Messiah. This Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ, would also be sacrificed by His Father, and raised again on the third day.

So it was with all of the patriarchs of old. Isaac blessed his sons with a view to our Lord Jesus. Jacob blessed his sons looking forward to the arrival of the Messiah. Joseph in giving instructions about returning his bones to the Promised Land, did so on account of his hope in the unseen Christ to come. Moses also, forsook the inheritance of his grandfather Pharaoh, in order that he might bear the same hardship that all the Israelites endured in their slavery, foreshadowing the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the hardness of His life.

They all had faith—hope in the promise of the unseen but coming Savior. They did not enjoy the fulfillment of the promise in their lifetime, but they endured all suffering and persecution knowing that they would be redeemed by the Lord. Likewise, in faith should we cling to the revealed promises of our Lord, enduring all suffering for the sake of the unseen crown of eternal life.

THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. Luke 14:1-11 (NKJV)

Now it happened, as He went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath, that they watched Him closely. And behold, there was a certain man before Him who had dropsy. And Jesus, answering, spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”

But they kept silent. And He took him and healed him, and let him go. Then He answered them, saying, “Which of you, having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?” And they could not answer Him regarding these things.

So He told a parable to those who were invited, when He noted how they chose the best places, saying to them: “When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honorable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, ‘Give place to this man,’ and then you begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, go up higher.’ Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The COLLECT

Lord, we beseech Thee, grant Thy people grace to withstand the temptations of the devil and with pure hearts and minds to follow Thee, the only God; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth, and reigneth, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

THE HOLY GOSPEL

St. Luke 7:11-17 (NKJV)

Now it happened, the day after, that He went into a city called Nain; and many of His disciples went with Him, and a large crowd. And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her. When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother.

Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen up among us”; and, “God has visited His people.” And this report about Him went throughout all Judea and all the surrounding region.

The COLLECT

Lord, we pray Thee that Thy grace may always go before and follow after us and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth, and reigneth, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Jesus Christ is our perfection.

Man's idea of "perfect" and God's idea of perfect are often different. We take the blessings He gives us in this world, arrange them in a way that we find beneficial, and then we assume that things are "perfect", or at least more perfect than the alternatives. If we are fortunate, it is about that time that God comes along and challenges our understanding of what is truly good and perfect.

The Jews relied on the institutions and practices that had been handed down to them from the time of the patriarchs. Some of these teachings from God were maintained, others were changed by men who failed to understand God's Words. But when the truth of Jesus Christ was revealed there was no longer any need to rely on the limited previews in the former practices, and the pointlessness of man's corrupt additions were exposed as well. Compared to the perfection of Jesus Christ, neither could be considered perfect.

All of us must be reminded of what is truly good and perfect. God in Jesus Christ is the only perfection we can know until our own death and resurrection. Our Lord has made the sacrifice for our sins, which have kept us from perfection in this life. But He has given us His holy and perfect promise that He will make us perfect in the resurrection, even as He is perfect, according to His precious Blood.

Our faith is in Christ Jesus.

Outward things are important and valuable, but they must always be properly understood in relation to faith. It is by faith we are saved, as St. Paul has taught us.

Faith is not a new idea "invented" by the New Testament Church, either. Faith has always been the work of God's Spirit among His people. And Satan has been hard at work against faith from the time of our parents in the Garden.

Satan did not outwardly kill Adam and Eve, but he poisoned them and damaged their faith in God's Words. Throughout the generations of God's people, the Enemy has taken the outward works of the elders and faithful fathers of the Scriptures and attacked our faith that God was truly accomplishing holy things through these events. Satan attacks faith in the creation of the world; he attacks faith in the teachings and judgments of God; and he attacks faith in the miracles of God. Most of all, he would have us lose faith in the blessings we receive from Christ's cross.

However, the Spirit of God is mightier than the Enemy, because Christ has defeated Satan through His death and resurrection. All the blessings of God throughout the ages, attested to by His Words of Scripture, are the very things that create and sustain our faith in our Lord. Thanks be to God for the life we have through that faith! Amen!

Repentance and absolution keep us focused on Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 10 reminds us that the sacrifices of the old covenant did not perfectly atone for sins, but rather served as a valuable reminder of the perfect atonement that would come. The blood of animals could never accomplish what the Blood of Christ alone could accomplish. Yet it was important that God's people were reminded time and again that their sins truly did require blood, and that blood would one day be provided according to God's promise.

Likewise, we are to repent of our sins often and remember that God, in His mercy, has forgiven us all our sins according to our Holy Baptism into Christ Jesus. That forgiveness is sure and enduring, but we must still meditate on it often and be turned from our sinful works. As Hebrews 10:14 says, "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified." Remembrance of our Holy Baptism into Christ, and the blessings of fellowship that come from being encouraged by brothers and sisters within the Church are ways by which God keeps us focused on Christ and the life He creates in us.

Daily repentance and good works do not save us any more than the blood of animals, but they are powerful images of what God has given His people that we may be reminded of that which truly gives us life and salvation, the cross of Jesus Christ!

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's promises.

God's gifts to mankind are always good and perfect. If anything ever comes to fault or failure, it is because mankind was irresponsible, not God.

It is a testament to His mercy that He continues to come to us, giving us instructions and promises even when He knows that our sinfulness will interfere. He has every right to disregard us and leave us to suffer the consequences of our own self-destruction, yet He does not. It is also a testament to His wisdom and power that He takes our failures and works to bring good from our evil.

Our parents failed to avoid the one perilous tree in the Garden, but God continued to teach them and promised them a Son who would save them. He saved His chosen people from slavery and death, and taught them how to live according to righteousness, and to continue looking forward to that Son who would be the Savior, but they also failed. God's promise would not fail, and the Son came in Jesus Christ. The former images of the gifts and bloody sacrifices made sense because of the work of Christ. Our failures had not stopped God from fulfilling His promise, but even served it as the hatred and cowardice of men brought about the crucifixion of our Lord that would be the holiest of all sacrifices, which would redeem men once and for all time.

Thanks and glory be to God that His mercy is truly greater than our imperfection!

All holy things point to Jesus Christ.

Many elements of worship from the Old Testament have been incorporated into the Divine Service of the New Testament Church. Some details are more obvious than others, but we must remember that in all cases these things point to Christ crucified!

Some things from the Old Testament practices have taken on even greater meaning *because* they were made to testify of Christ so powerfully! Hebrews 9:10 speaks of the incompleteness of “foods and drinks” and “various washings”, but now the great sacramental gifts that Christ has given His Church are these very things. Our Lord’s Body and Blood are food and drink indeed in the Lord’s Supper, and we are made holy by the washing of regeneration in Baptism!

However, even these gifts can be abused if one’s focus is not on Christ. Some are so zealous to receive the Lord’s Supper frequently that they commune with those who reject Christ’s Words, thereby abusing the Sacrament that they are so eager to receive. Others turn the focus of Holy Baptism from God’s work to the decisions of man. Others also have made music and ceremony into idols, more important than right teaching of the Scriptures.

Even these great blessings of the Sacraments and the Divine Service must always be understood for what they truly are: manifestations of our Lord’s grace and mercy to us in Christ Jesus!

The blood of Jesus Christ has purified us.

Death and bloodshed are a necessary result of sin. The faithless try to deny this reality because they do not understand the seriousness of sin. In spite of noble aspirations, mankind will never be able to achieve world peace or eliminate sickness and aging. People will continue to die, and continue to kill one another, because that is the nature of this present world.

Thanks be to God that this is not our eternal destiny! Even the unfortunate realities of death and bloodshed were made to serve God’s holy work in Christ. Although death continues to happen among us, it is given a holy result through Jesus Christ.

Small mistakes can lead to great crimes or tragic deaths, so every type of sin must be considered a serious matter. In God’s eyes, every sin is serious enough to warrant the death of His Son, and it is through God’s own sacrifice and bloodshed in Christ crucified that there is remission and forgiveness for every sin!

And just as God has used death to accomplish our salvation, it also becomes our portal to eternal life. For even though everyone must face the reality of death, by faith in Christ we have the promise of heaven, the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come as our eternal destiny! “And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.”