

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Epiphany 7

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Love imposes upon each of us a solemn duty, because as Paul said, we are the temple of God. And the task is not to find those we can love but to find those that have already been given to us to love, and to continue to find them lovable even when we have all the reasons in the world not to love them. The nature and immensity of this duty is such that it restrains the one who has accepted this duty to look at love from an either/or perspective. For the one who has accepted this duty must first understand its all-encompassing nature. Moses in his prayer to the people of Israel encourages them to be holy. Christ in his sermon charges his hearers to be perfect. Whether the desire is to be perfect or holy, the task is that we can all accept in equal measure the duty that love imposes upon us. To think more broadly about perfection or holiness, being holy or being perfect is determined by an outward embrace of the duty that love imposes upon us.

Love imposes a duty on us because love seeks not its own. To seek your own creates the appetite for greed, selfishness and falsehood. To seek your own is to emphasize the idea of an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth, or simply to deny the humanity of others. But to be holy, as Moses suggested or to be perfect as Jesus suggested is to be able to subvert your interest by way of self-renunciation. Martin Buber is reported to have said that “You cannot find redemption until you see the flaws in your own soul, and try to efface them. Nor can a people be redeemed until it sees the flaws in its soul and tries to efface them. But whether it be an individual or a people, whoever shuts out the realization of their flaws is shutting out redemption. We can be redeemed only to the extent to which we see ourselves.”

He goes on to say that “The world is in need of redemption, but the redemption must not be expected to happen as an act of sheer grace. Our task is to make the world worthy of redemption. Our faith and our works are preparations for ultimate redemption.” In as much as we can count on grace to accomplish the purpose of God, we cannot limit or deny our contribution and role in this effort.

From my point of view, to be able to see ourselves for who we are is therapeutic, it leads us on the path of redemption, it helps us to truly appreciate that in our effort to be holy, to be perfect, we dare not categorize anything as mine or yours. For what is yours is mine, and what is mine is yours.

The idea of mutual ownership of the gifts of creation and life delegitimizes any claim of ownership by any one individual. That is why we cannot defraud our neighbor because what is ours is our neighbor's, and when we defraud our neighbor, we defraud our very own selves.

See, the duty of love is one which motivates a giver to give in such a way that the gift appears as if it were the receiver's possession. And so to be holy, as Moses suggested, the farmer cannot ignore the poor and alien in the community by harvesting every single crop or ripping his vineyard bare. The farmer defrauds and denies the humanity of the poor and alien by taking all that he planted. It is his duty to harvest, but also to leave some of the crops for the poor and alien.

Love imposes a duty on us not because it compels us to act one way or the other-for there is no reward or punishment in the way we act, nor do we act because of self-righteousness, we act because we accept the duty. The one who does not accept this duty is the one who chooses who it is that deserves his or her love or is lovable enough. To be holy, to be perfect as your heavenly Father, is to dignify all because He does dignify all by causing the rain to fall on both the righteous and the unrighteous, and the sun to rise on both the good and the bad.

The duty of love is like being in debt-and in fact it is our task to be in debt. To be in debt is the awareness of being gripped by a love that compels us to turn the other cheek. But our first inclination is to react, and sometimes we over-react. Forgiveness comes at a higher cost for us, but the duty that love imposes on the holy and perfect is one which requires them to let go. And so to the one who sues you for your coat, give him your cloak as well. Refuse to glorify anger, quarrelling and animosity.

This is not to suggest that we should be indifferent to the harm or hurt others cause us, but the duty of love is one which constraints us from seeking revenge because revenge is the Lord's. The one who desires to be holy and perfect, prizes reconciliation over division or revenge.

One of the challenges that I have had to deal with is capital punishment. I really do not see the point of taking another person's. I was watching TV many years ago in Atlanta, where a family of a victim of murder was interviewed after witnessing the execution of the murderer. They talked about how justice has been served, and that they now have closure. I do not minimize the depth of pain and anguish of this family. I asked myself, what does it mean to have closure?

We can all agree that an execution will not restore what has been lost, nor should we minimize the horror of a violent death, but should justice be only recognizable because it gives each its own? Should we measure justice based on the depth of its retribution, or on its capacity for restoration? You have heard it said, that “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Jesus said.

But if love places a duty upon us, then our desire to be holy or perfect should be one driven mainly by a kind of attitude that honors human restoration because it believes in human transformation and growth. Human beings are never a finished product, that is why we pray for our enemies and those who persecute us because we believe in human redemption, and we believe we must keep ourselves open to the possibility of reconciliation.

In fact, Jesus himself wonders aloud in the gospel story when he questions the inherent wisdom in loving those who love you since tax collectors love those who love them. From the point of view of the gospel story to love those who love you is not only self-serving but it erodes any ability to differentiate between those who accept love as a duty and those who do not.

As a matter of fact, it is Christian love which discovers and affirms that one’s neighbor exists, and that everyone is one’s neighbor.

The duty that love then imposes is that which makes it possible for us to disavow any idea of preferential love towards one neighbor and another. For that reason, we cannot only greet those who greet us, nor can we pray only for those who love us or wish us well.

The duty love imposes is one in which those who desire to be holy or perfect understand that we are the temple of God, and our relationship with God is not only primary, but that we are attached at the hip with God and to one another. On the basis of this relationship with God and each other, love imposes on us the duty not to revile the deaf, put a stumbling block before the blind or refuse to lend to anyone who seeks to borrow from us. The duty prevents us from being impediments to the well-being of the vulnerable. But it must also be acknowledged that we were created in way that honors our freedom to reject this primary relationship, to abandon our true selves for something diminishing or to lift up that relationship in pursuit of a desire to be holy or perfect.

There is a cartoon of a smiling demon welcoming new contingent of souls to hell with these words “There’s no right or wrong here. It’s just what works for you.” But what works for you or for me may not necessarily make us holy or perfect.

The point Jesus seeks to make is that within each of us lies the capacity for grace, compassion and goodness. And so an atheist can be as graceful, compassionate and good as any Christian. However, the underlying motivation for our action should not be about a feeling that something is the right thing to do, but knowing that love imposes a duty upon those who are the temple of God, to be graceful, compassionate and good, and in fact to desire and do what love requires of us to do, for it is in doing so-it is in being graceful, compassionate and good do we become holy and perfect as our heavenly Father in heaven. Amen.