

# SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER<sup>1</sup>

## The Sixth Sunday after Trinity<sup>2</sup>

### Lessons:<sup>3</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the twenty-fourth Chapter of the Second Book of Moses, called Exodus.<sup>4</sup>

“And he said unto Moses, Come up unto the LORD, thou, and Aaron, Nadab [NAY-dab], and Abihu [uh-BYE-who], and seventy of the elders of Israel; and worship ye afar off. And Moses alone shall come near the LORD: but they shall not come nigh; neither shall the people go up with him.

“And Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the LORD hath said will we do. And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD, and rose up early in the morning, and builded an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the children of Israel, which offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen unto the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood, and put it in basins; and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD hath made with you concerning all these words.

“Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab [NAY-dab], and Abihu [uh-BYE-who], and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink.

“... And the glory of the LORD abode upon mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days: and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud. And the sight of the glory of the LORD was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. And Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and gat him up into the mount: and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the twentieth Verse of the fifth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.<sup>5</sup>

“... Jesus said unto his disciples, Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell-fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Gospel: “*Jesus said unto his disciples, Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*”<sup>6</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

**Homily:**

There used to be an advertisement for the U.S. Army which urged potential soldiers to “Be all you can be.” This was, the ad seemed to imply, the least you could do for yourself and your country. To do less was unpatriotic.

In order to be all he or she could be, the ad suggested, they should be in tip-top physical condition, they should be ready to take on all adversaries, and they should fear no challenge. Perhaps if one is considering becoming a soldier, those things are of primary importance. Preparing to meet with our Lord, whether at the end of our lives or at the altar, offers a different set of demands to be “all you can be.”

Today’s Gospel addresses some of those demands. Our Lord first mentions righteousness, by which He means the practice of faith by a pure heart and in grace. Righteousness is required, but not as the scribes and Pharisees understood it. Their understanding was defective because it involved complying with the minutiae of the written law without observing the grander purpose of the law, which was intended to glorify God and preserve His people.

Meanwhile, they plainly ignored requirements that they show mercy, love for others and an obedience to bring others to God, rather than force them away from God. We might call this “supermarket Judaism”, after the “supermarket Catholicism” which is so popular in our own day and in which self-professed Christians browse through the storehouse of the Faith, accepting only those parts of the Christian revelation and tradition that they find personally convenient, or aesthetically pleasing, or in conformity with their own personal social and political leanings.

In this selective compliance with the law, the scribes and Pharisees made a mockery of that law’s central requirements, and held in contempt those who tried to follow those requirements. Instead, Jesus urged them to “be all they can be” in terms of obeying God and His law. Anyone coming into God’s presence at the altar should be in as righteous a state as possible. Doing anything less is an affront, an insult, to God. Not only is our sacrifice unacceptable in such an instance, but we too are unacceptable.

As examples, Jesus said, if someone was bringing a gift to God, but held hatred in his heart against someone else, he should first go and resolve his hatred, which is contrary to God's command that we love one another. Once he has resolved his anger, or spite, then he can come with pure heart before God. Then he can make a more righteous offering of sacrifice to God. Then he can act in compliance to His command.

If we come before the altar while there remains hatred in our heart, then no matter what our sacrifice offering might be, it cannot be acceptable to God, who commands us to have pure and contrite hearts. Surely, if you wish to serve God, then you want to do so in as pure and perfect state as possible so as to be as close to acceptable to Him as possible.

It may be that whatever conflicts we have with others cannot be resolved by our actions alone. But in that event, we should have made whatever steps we can to resolve the conflict before presuming to come to God's altar. We should do our part first, acting out of love and mercy and charity. Jesus' entire ministry is built around this idea: that we should be as close to God as we can possibly be, then seek His help to become even closer to Him.

And, as God is merciful, we too are to be merciful and full of forgiveness: *"I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell-fire."* So loathsome to God is unrighteous anger, hatred and careless evil, that it can cause one to lose salvation.

How many times, while driving, have you been cut off, or had someone grab a parking place you were just getting ready to pull into, or perhaps have had someone drive right at you with lights on high beam blinding you, and you have murmured under your breath, *"You idiot"*? How many times have we all had some clerk in a store short-change us, get an order wrong, or make some other mistake that cost us time, money and anger?

Each of us has had these experiences and we need to remember that they are tests of character. Each occasion is a chance for us to change, to repent of anger and judgment of others, and to replace those things with mercy, love and forgiveness.

An act of compliance is not sufficient. God sees through that. We must search our hearts and determine whether we are ready to be in God's presence when we come to the altar. If we are not ready, then we need to first get ourselves ready. We need to "be all we can be."

Let us pray:

Assist us mercifully, O Lord, in these our supplications and prayers, and dispose the way of thy servants towards the attainment of everlasting salvation; that, among all the changes and chances of this mortal life, they may ever be defended by thy most gracious and ready help; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*<sup>7</sup>

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The Rev'd Larry Wagoner, MSW<sup>8</sup>  
July 7, 2013

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<sup>1</sup> "Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening." *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>2</sup> This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Sixth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxix (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 24:1-11, 16-18 (KJV).

<sup>5</sup> St. Matthew 5:20-26 (KJV).

<sup>6</sup> St. Matthew 5:20 (KJV).

<sup>7</sup> "Collects", *Prayers and Thanksgivings*, The Book of Common Prayer 49 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>8</sup> Supply Priest, Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune, MS, and Christ Anglican Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Metairie, LA.