

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity¹
(Year II)

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of Nehemiah.³

“And it came to pass in the month Nisan [**NYE-san**], in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes [**are-tuh-ZERK-seas**] the king, that wine was before him: and I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king. Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence. Wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid, And said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire? Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers’ sepulchres, that I may build it. And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time. Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah; And a letter unto Asaph [**AY-saff**] the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.

“Then I came to the governors beyond the river, and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent captains of the army and horsemen with me. When Sanballat [**san-BAL-it**] the Horonite [**HOE-right**], and Tobiah [**toe-BYE-uh**] the ser-

vant, the Ammonite [**AMM-un-ight**], heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel. So I came to Jerusalem, and was there three days.

“And I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem: neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon. And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire. Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and to the king’s pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass. Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned. And the rulers knew not whither I went, or what I did; neither had I as yet told it to the Jews, nor to the priests, nor to the nobles, nor to the rulers, nor to the rest that did the work.

“Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach. Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king’s words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work. But when Sanballat [**san-BAL-it**] the Horonite [**HOE-right**], and Tobiah [**toe-BYE-uh**] the servant, the Ammonite [**AMM-un-ight**], and Geshem [**GESH-um**] the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king? Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

when we speak of these adverse influences, we are speaking of sin.

For the essence of sin is that it is what separates us from God. That is the teaching of the account in Genesis⁸ of the Fall of Man: sin is disobedience of God’s will for us and that disobedience, when too profound or prolonged, constitutes a barrier between us and God.

So on that journey toward perfection to which St. Paul referred, that quest for the presence of God which will make irrelevant all intermediaries and aids such as spiritual gifts, the most important part for us is the struggle to overcome those barriers that we ourselves erect against God. Christ died to make it possible for us to be saved; no one but we ourselves can prevent His sacrifice from being effective for that purpose.

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February 10, 2013

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on Quinquagesima Sunday, 2013.

² *The Table of Lessons*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxix (The Anglican Church of Canada 1962).

³ Proverbs 2:1-end (KJV).

⁴ I Corinthians 13:1-13 (KJV).

⁵ I Corinthians 13:8-10 (RSV).

⁶ HERBERT G. MAY & BRUCE M. METZGER, eds., THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA, REVISED STANDARD VERSION 1392 fn. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁷ *Norman Hillyer, 1 Corinthians*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, eds., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED, 3rd Ed. 1068 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970).

⁸ Genesis 3.

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tance will be needed for us to reach toward God. In other words, when we have achieved what theologians call “the beatific vision”, we will have direct, that is, immediate, access to the source of all goodness, so we will have no need of props or aids.⁷

In my father’s youth, in the very early years of the 20th Century, there was a humorous colloquialism that expressed the ultimate state of something: “than which there is no than which-er”. If ever that phrase applied accurately to anything, it certainly applies to the prospect of dwelling in eternity with the divinity, something so perfect that there can be nothing else more perfect than it is.

So that is the first lesson I would have you remember from today’s Epistle: if we are doing what God wishes us to do, that is, if we are doing what Christians are meant to do, then we are on a journey toward ultimate perfection.

The second lesson I would have you remember here is that God has given us certain means of support or assistance to help us along that journey. Among these helps or aids are the Gifts of the Spirit to which we have already had reference.

But there is also a third lesson here, one that comes both from implications we can and should draw from the first two and also that, sadly, comes inescapably from our own experience. It is that, just as God has given us aids and helps to assist our journey toward perfection, so, too, there are on that same journey other influences, obstacles and traps, that work to retard our progress and even to frustrate it entirely.

Conclusion:

It does not require a degree in theology to understand what these hindrances may be. The moment that we consider that they are the things that make it difficult—sometimes impossible—for us to draw near to God, then it is obvious that

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.⁴

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[A]s for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imper-

fect will pass away.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Development:

Throughout Scripture, Prophecies—at least true prophecies, the ones that come as the result of divine inspiration—are regarded as good things. After all, real prophecies are messages from God and we can never hear enough from that source. Knowledge is similar. And “tongues”—by which, of course, St. Paul means *glossolalia*, the phenomenon sometimes known as “speaking in tongues”—is likewise traditionally regarded as good, for it is also seen as something that happens only under the inspiration of the Third Person of the Trinity, that is, of God the Holy Spirit.

From this perspective, the principal difference between prophecy and knowledge, on the one hand, and speaking in tongues, on the other, is that prophecy and knowledge edify the whole people of God while speaking in tongues, uplifting and comforting as it may be, is of use primarily to the person who experiences it.

But these observations about the natures of prophecies, knowledge, and “tongues” themselves raise a question. For if these things are, in essence, good, then why does St. Paul tell us that we experience these things only in an imperfect state and when true perfection comes, they will pass away?

The answer is that here, St. Paul is discussing *spiritual gifts*.⁶ In doing so, he compares the more dramatic and therefore obvious gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and speaking in tongues with the less obvious, but even more essential, gift of love. It is precisely because each of his three original examples, prophecy, knowledge, and speaking in tongues, occurs only at the express instigation of the Holy Spirit that each of them is a gift from that Spirit to us. In fact, these are among the several

benefits of the Spirit to which, we are taught, we will receive special access in the Sacrament of Confirmation.

And love, although in some ways less obvious than those three, or, indeed, than any of the other “sevenfold Gifts of the Spirit”, is similarly the product of a divine spirit. It is, moreover, preëminently a gift that works to build up the Body of Christ, for it is love that is the most characteristic Christian virtue and that most significantly distinguishes committed Christians from the world around them.

But if that is so, then why does Paul say these gifts are destined to pass away? And why does he tell us that, important are as prophecy, knowledge, and the gift of tongues, the gift of love is greater? The answer to those questions lies in the implications of the whole passage that forms today’s Epistle.

That implication is that most of the gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy, knowledge, and “tongues”, are given for our strengthening and uplift in this present world, to assist us on our journey toward *perfection*, or, to paraphrase the Army’s onetime recruiting slogan, our quest to “be all we can be”. But these are *mediate*, not *immediate* goods. That is, they are means to some other ends, not ends in themselves.

When Paul tells us things are presently imperfect but that they will one day be perfect, he is telling us that we are engaged in a process of perfection. When and if that process reaches its intended end, we will find ourselves living forever in the presence of perfection, which, along with ultimate love, is what God is.

Thus, where prophecy, knowledge, “tongues”, and the other typical Gifts of the Spirit are temporary in nature, intended to uplift us in this first, preliminary, earthly phase of our existence, love is permanent in nature. It will be a prominent feature of the later, heavenly phase of our existence. And then, at that point in our development, no intermediary forms of assis-