

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
Ember Wednesday in Autumn¹

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifteenth Verse of the eighteenth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.³

“The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; According to all that thou desiredst of the LORD thy God in Horeb [**HOAR-ebb**] in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. And the LORD said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him. But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

Here beginneth the first Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.⁴

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes [**SOSS-thih-nee-z**] our brother, Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith [**SETH**], I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas [**SEA-fuss**]; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius [**GAY-uss**]; Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas [**STEFF-uh-nuss**]: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xl (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Deuteronomy 18:15-end (KJV).

⁴ I Corinthians 1:1-18 (KJV).

⁵ I Corinthians 1:9.

part of His character. It's his nature to be faithful, just as it's His nature to be just and to be holy and to be merciful. When God says, "You shall be Holy, as I am holy," you can depend upon it.

This congregation here present today is by no means as troublesome or problematic as the one with which St. Paul had to deal in Corinth. But even if you were, I would still be able to address you as a holy people, called to be saints, destined to be blameless on the Day of Judgment. I could do that because in Baptism you were redeemed from the headship of Adam and subsumed under the headship of Christ. Adam led us all into sin and death. Christ leads us to life and holiness.

On the Day of Judgment, the head will speak for the body. We shall be raised from the dead because our head has been raised from the dead. We shall be glorified because our head has been glorified. We shall be holy because our head is holy.

The passage concludes with a reference to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which the Apostle catalogues elsewhere in his writings. "... You are not lacking," he says, "in any spiritual gift as you wait for the reveling of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Christ our Lord."

I'm not going to enumerate here the Gifts of the Spirit. But I will say this. You are not lacking in any of the spiritual gifts that are needed for a life of holiness. The gifts are distributed among you and are meant to be shared. No one of us has the all of them but among us in this congregation, taken together, all of those gifts are here. It's just a matter of using them.

God is faithful. All of us must be faithful, too.

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Text:

From the Second Lesson: "God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Christ our Lord."⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

"God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Christ our Lord." That verse, I believe, it is the key to the whole passage. To explain why, I begin with a verse from the book of Leviticus.

God says to Moses, "Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, 'You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.'" The Jewish community generally understood that text as a command. That's how St. Paul understood it before his conversion. As Saul of Tarsus, he believed that God required His people to be holy in order to be worthy of their election as the chosen people. As a Pharisee, Paul believed that if all Jews would keep the whole law perfectly for just one day, the Messiah would come and usher in the Kingdom of God.

When the followers of some peasant rabbi from Galilee went around saying that the Messiah had already come and that the Kingdom of God was open to sinners, Saul the Pharisee saw such people as a menace, hindering the fulfillment of Israel's hope. That is why he was so vigorous in pursuing and persecuting them.

But after his conversion experience, when Saul became known as Paul, he realized that God does not require people to make themselves holy. When God says that the whole congregation of Israel will be holy, He is making a promise, not a demand. He is promising to share His own holiness with His people.

As Christians, we believe that God has fulfilled that promise in the person of Jesus Christ. He has taken our human nature into His own divine nature and purified it by dying and rising from the dead. And He has done this for all people and not only for the Jews.

I'm getting into the concept of headship here, and I can't get into that too deeply this morning, but the basic idea is that the body partakes of the nature of the head. To put it another way, the head controls and shapes the body. And I'm not just talking about the brain.

We see in families that the head of the household sets the tone for the family. In politics, the head of state determines the direction that the nation will take. In religion, it is well known that people become like the gods they serve.

St. Paul is able to address the church in Corinth as "those sanctified in Christ Jesus," because in Baptism they have been incorporated into the body of Christ and subsumed under His headship. They are holy because they are part of a body whose head is holy.

To get the full impact of that statement, we have to understand something about the congregation to which the Apostle was writing. It was a congregation fragmented by what we would call cliques or factions.

There were those who spoke in tongues and those who did not. There were those who saw themselves as quite knowledgeable about the world as well as about spiritual matters and who looked down on their poor, ignorant fellow parishioners who had no such special knowledge. Further on in this letter, St. Paul would remind this congregation that tongues were destined to cease and knowledge would vanish away, and only love would remain.

Some of the cliques were loosely organized around certain leaders. Some were loyal to Paul; some were followers of Peter; some claimed allegiance to Apollos; some were so arrogant as to claim that they were the only ones who followed Christ. Later in this letter, St. Paul would forcefully denounce that kind of thinking.

There were other problems as well: sexual scandals that were known and tolerated, some people refused to associate or share food with poor people at the common meals, doctrinal arguments degenerated into personal attacks, even lawsuits were brought against fellow parishioners. Again St. Paul would address those matters later in the letter and strongly condemn them.

St. Paul was well aware of the kind of people to whom he was writing; he was, after all the founding pastor of that congregation. But in spite of all that he knows about them, he addresses these people as those who are sanctified, which means made holy. He reminds them that they are called to be saints, every one of them, and he thanks God that they have been given all the resources they need to become what they are destined to be.

"I thank God in your behalf," he says, "that you fall short in no gift as you wait for the coming of the Lord who will present you blameless on the day of judgment." (That's a loose but accurate translation.)

How can the Apostle say all that about such people and about such a congregation? The answer is in the very next verse, the one I used as my text this morning: "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ."

God is faithful. That's what matters. Our sanctity, our holiness, like our salvation, does not depend on us; it depends on God. And God is faithful. God keeps His promises. That's