



# ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday July 3rd, 2016 - Trinity 6

## ✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.

The passage selected for the sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:

“Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there remember that thy brother has ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, and be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.”

St. Matt. 5:23-4

To me, this is one of the most terrifying readings of all the Gospels. It is the passage that identifies the greatest shortcoming in my own spiritual life. I have to confess that I am always torn as to whether I shouldn't be the first person to leave the altar and to be about the work of reconciling with my brothers. But you will notice that I am planted here, and I don't want any of you who share my sense of failing in this admonition to leave right now either. As we progress through the sermon, I will try to explain to you why we shouldn't be crowding though the back door, yet.

There are so many lessons that emanate from this single passage. It teaches us about the great commandment, about the nature of sacrifice, about humility and charity, about the progression of grace. To make best sense of these lessons, we have to address the lessons in that order.

First, we need to consider the great commandment, which we say at the start of every Communion service. “Though shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with, mind and all your strength. And the second is like unto it, though shalt love they neighbor as thyself.” The order of the Commandment is clear, We love God first, and we love our neighbor second. What this passage shows us, however, is the order in which we have

to execute that commandment. To say we love God first, and to make loving our neighbor our second effort is simply making noise. It is only by loving our neighbor, that there is any gravity, any suitability, in our profession of loving God. Jesus plainly tells us that we cannot profess to loving God, who we cannot see, when we cannot love our neighbor, who we see very clearly.

Which brings us to the lesson about the nature of sacrifice. The altar is the place of sacrifice. The gift given upon this altar was the sacrifice of Jesus Christ who died for our sins. The Old Testament is also built on the worship centered around sacrifice at the altar. Whether giving thanks, praising God, or seeking forgiveness, the petitioner brought the specified gift to the priest and it was offered upon the altar. The Pharisees that heard Jesus would have interpreted the words about gifts brought to the altar as the blood of goats or sheep or turtledoves. It could also have been the showbread reserved to the priests, or the money given to the treasury to support the temple.

But through the insight provided by the Holy Spirit, we have the better interpretation of these words, we have their meaning as revealed in the New Covenant of the sacrifice of Jesus. We don't offer the blood of goats and sheep and doves any longer. We do offer bread and wine, and the tithing that comes in the baskets, but we are asked to bring something more. What we should be giving is revealed in the psalms. “Offer unto God thanksgiving, \* and pay thy vows unto the Most Highest. And call upon me in the time of trouble; \* so will I hear thee, and thou shalt praise me.” Psalm 50 15-16 and “For thou desirest no sacrifice, else would I give it thee; \* but thou delightest not in burnt-offerings. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: \* a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise.” Psalm 51 16-17

That sacrifice that Jesus commands us to bring starts with the offering plate, and with the bread and wine, but it also includes our thanksgiving, our vows, our troubles, our brokenness and our contrition for our failings to our brothers. It is startling that what Jesus demands of us isn't just ritual worship, but our lives, our experience, our joy and sadness our pain and our failings. Failing, by the way, is sinfulness. Jesus wants us to give our sinfulness and contrition as part of our offering, and specifically he demands the sins that represent our failure to love each other, the second part of the great commandment.

Why would God want these broken and ugly parts of our lives? He wants them to do what it is God does with all our gifts, to transform them and return them to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. The monetary gifts are set aside from our earthly life and pursuit to be first fruits to God, but the gift is transformed into the Church and its ministers, which are given to serve and comfort you. The bread and wine are transformed in the Body and Blood of Christ, which are given back to you as the godly life that carries us through this world and to our inheritance in the next. Our sadness and brokenness and sinfulness and contrition are transformed as well. God takes them from us, washes them and transforms them from selfishness to godliness. Those gifts we offer become his Gospel, written and lived and preached by the actions of His people to their brothers.

The power that comes from these gifts transformed, to act in a godly and loving way, changes the world around us. It changes our own lives, it changes the people we live with, it changes our relationship to them. It is easy for us to see how our pride, and the hypocrisy that stems from it, harm the Church and inhibits the Gospel. We can point to many times in our lives where pride and hypocrisy of church people became our own excuse for failing to worship God as he demands, either in loving Him with our whole hearts or loving our neighbors. However, we don't often remember to share the power of the godliness we encounter in God's well church people.

I would like to share an example. There was a priest who had done great damage to St. Stephen's causing a schism and split that from which we are just now recovering. That same man ultimately became a bishop in another jurisdiction whose geography overlaps ours. Fr. Hawtin had firm ground to be angry and defensive about this man. Nevertheless, when our own Bishop was ordained here at St. Stephen's, Father Guy invited this man back into our parish to join in the ordination. That was an act of forgiveness and charity that stunned me. I found myself in the presence of a priest who actually did the hard work of living the Gospel, and it had a transformative effect on me.

Over the last few weeks, that same bishop that split St Stephen's started a mission in the back yard of one of our

own parishes and was enticing people to leave our parish and join him. Fr Hawtin sadly asked himself in one of our conversations if the sacrifice he made in forgiving and reconciling with that man, having him back here for our hospitality at Bishop John's ordination, hadn't been wasted. As I wrote this sermon, I had the Epiphany that his godly efforts were not wasted. That man hadn't changed, but Fr. Hawtin had changed me. I was led to understand that if I was to serve under him in this parish, that I would have to become a better and more godly priest, a better more forgiving man. I still struggle to live up to that expectation, but his example stands before me as the model to which I should aspire. So his example was not only, not wasted, it was returned as a gift to me and hopefully will help me to be a better servant in this parish.

Which brings me to the place we started at the beginning of the sermon. Why aren't we streaming out the doors to ask for forgiveness right now to reconcile with our brothers and sisters. We can look for that answer in St Paul's letter to the Philippians. We can be "confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ". The good work that is started in us today is the shameful recognition that the lives we offer in sacrifice today are plagued by pride and the lack of charity that cause us to need reconciliation with our brothers. The power of the verse is that we recognize and are sorry for our sinfulness in these broken relationships. We want to do better, to mend these relationships so we can bring a better gift to the altar. But can we actually do it now. Most likely not, or we would have already done it. It will take an infusion of grace and godliness to empower us to be forgiving, and loving stewards of our broken relationships. The source of that infusion is the transformation of our unworthy gift that accompanies the return of Christ's Body and Blood to change and empower our lives. We repent and offer our intention to change now, and as we leave, fortified by Eucharist, we can be empowered by the Holy Spirit to actually heal those wounded relationships. In doing so, we will change ourselves, our relationships, but also witness the Gospel in a way that will sanctify and bless those who witness our Godly actions. The power to heal what our brother has against us starts now as repentance, becomes an offering, and then is transformed by grace and with the Eucharist to be the power to become truly charitable and humble enough to make peace with our brother. So, we will be patient, offer our contrition, be blessed, and then perfect our gift by loving our brother as we should.

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*