

Trinity 17

I take as my text today from the Gospel of St. Luke:

And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day? And they held their peace.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”

We know from scripture that there were strict laws for what a person could do on the Sabbath, and that Jesus was frequently perceived as being in violation of the Sabbath.

So, perhaps, there is another side of the question, especially if we look at the healing of the man with dropsy from our Lord’s perspective. Was Jesus really asking, “Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?”

What we are seeing more and more revealed by our Lord is the idea that the Jews had reached a stage where the practice of religion was the focus of their worship, rather than God.

By this, the Law had become the focal point of their religion. Yes, the Law had come through Moses, yet, over time it had become so convoluted that it was impossible to truly follow.

This practice of religion had evolved to the point that, from their perspective, it was the Law that would save them. They turned more and more away from focusing on God to focusing on the Law and its intricacies. But the Law alone could not save them.

What was missing from the whole scheme of things that had to be righted? Compassion, Mercy, Loving-kindness.

Or even more simply stated: love. Love — the very nature of God and should be at the forefront of all our lives. Essentially, the Law, as it had evolved, though given in Love, focused on externals and lacked a focus on love, until it was fulfilled by the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The first and Great Commandment to love God and the Second Commandment to love our neighbor are explicit under the Law of Moses; we also find that deeds of kindness were considered above priestly purity.

However, by the time of our Lord's ministry, we could see that those qualities which demonstrated love had become secondary to all the requirements of the Law. Compassion, Mercy, Loving-kindness took a back seat to the concept of purity.

We may ask ourselves: are we not created out of love? Was not everything created out of love? If that is so, should we not then focus our lives on the very nature of our creation, of all of creation?

However we may practice our religion, it is of naught if it is devoid of the love of God, devoid of love expressed through Compassion, Mercy, Loving-kindness.

Isn't it rather paradoxical that Jesus was considered a lawbreaker and a dangerous and irreligious man because He did good, regardless of the day of the week? He truly fulfilled the Law which they could not.

In the story of Jesus healing the man with dropsy, as with other similar healings, we find an explicit illustration of the hypocrisy of the leadership of His day, expressed beautifully when we look at the intricacies of the confrontation.

First, what is dropsy? Essentially, it is the accumulation of water in various parts of the body. It goes under different names today, depending on which part is affected. In that day, it was largely incurable and could prove to be deadly.

Secondly, our Lord refers to pulling an ox from a ditch into which it had fallen on the Sabbath. Ditch here refers to an open well, and the ox, if not extricated, would eventually drown.

Thus, we see in the comparison a paradox — the Pharisees would more readily save an ox from drowning on the Sabbath than see a drowning man healed on the Sabbath.

Now, we can begin to see, in part, why the Scribes and Pharisees were so contemptuous of our Lord. Why shouldn't they be — He was cutting to the core. Might not their contempt be so exaggerated because they knew He was right?

Furthermore, here was someone invited to dine with them. He was their guest, and supposedly, as a guest, under their protection. Yet, they watched Him, for they had invited Him seemingly with a purpose, to entrap Jesus, contrary to all the laws of hospitality.

Jesus had asked pertinent questions, on more than one occasion, using the phrase, "Is it not lawful?" Now, once again, with a person suffering from dropsy, He poses the same question — is it not lawful?

The Scribes and Pharisees, knowing that they could only answer in the affirmative, that it was indeed lawful, kept their peace. This they did in order to convict our Lord by their silence. But, at the same time, they were, instead, convicting themselves.

Jesus was a radical in that time. His focus on God, God's love, love itself as basic to our nature, challenged the whole religious system. Love as a basis of the relationship between God and man, and between each other, was just so foreign to their thinking.

So, let's fast forward two thousand or so years to today's world, where we find all the technology, the advancement of knowledge, and all the possibilities to do good. What has changed from that of Biblical times?

Today, in the now, is our practice of religion based on love, or is it still institution-focused? Is the practice of religion expressed through showing compassion, mercy, loving-kindness, or is it focused on a hypocritical concern that is self-promoting?

Without a doubt, the visible Church must be an institution in order to maintain the faith as once delivered by our Lord to and through His Apostles to the whole world, by way of the Church.

But, the institution — that is the Church — in and of itself is not the problem. The failings of the Church as an institution do not represent the failings of God but the failings of men.

In his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul addresses Christian Unity, and charges us as Christians to work to maintain a visible unity in the Church, a new "society."

This Unity, however, is tied to Purity. The "oneness" of the new society, this Family in Christ, its unity, depends on Purity. And, this purity is our character and conduct, the kind of life we must live within the fellowship of the Christian Church.

What is this kind of life we must live?

Like our Lord, it is doing good every day of our lives. It is emulating our Lord, not only by doing good but also by living up to the standards He has set for us — compassion, mercy, loving-kindness.

No one who wishes to be called a Christian can be exempted from the moral qualities that are the foundation stones of the Christian character.

St. Paul lists five essential qualities: lowliness, meekness, patience, mutual forbearance, and love, all of which must be reflected in each of us.

Moreover, these qualities are essential in bringing about Christian Unity.

It is the task of the Church, and of each individual Christian, to be instruments of our Lord in bringing about an universal reconciliation between individuals, within the world and with God.

In keeping with St. Paul's focus, especially as expressed in the 13th chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians, it is through love that we are able to accomplish all things. We all most certainly remember those beautiful words defining forever Faith, Hope, and Charity; Charity as Love, being the greatest of the three. There can be no Faith, no Hope, without Love.

Thus, we may ask: do we truly embrace our fellow human beings, God's creatures, with love?

By love, we do not mean sentimental love; we mean the love of God that wells up within our hearts, and overflows into our lives. It is the love that compels us to do good. It is the love that allows us to see good in all of God's creation, especially in our fellow man.

Without this love, we are materially bound and forever separated from God.

It is not the externals that save us. It is the love that wells up within our hearts.

Truly, our practice of religion should be reflected in the love we have within us: love of God, love of all God's creation, and love of each other, most readily expressed through our compassion, mercy, and loving-kindness.

If we, indeed, have that love, we, like Jesus, would be predisposed to doing good every day of the week — even the Sabbath. It is, indeed, reflective of a Living Faith that should drive each of us in our daily lives.