

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Hebrews 13:1-8, 14-16

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon text this morning is from our Second Lesson, from the Thirteenth Chapter of Hebrews. The Chapter begins this way:

¹Let brotherly love continue. ²Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. (Hebrews 13:1-2, KJV)

This Thirteenth Chapter of Hebrews contains a very lovely and gentle exhortation to Christian virtue. It commends five virtues to us: mutual love, hospitality to strangers, sympathy for the suffering, high regard for marriage, and contentment with what we have. I mean to work our way through all five virtues, but first, to begin, let us ponder the Teacher of these virtues. The virtues themselves are beautiful and are held in honor by all, except by pirates and other lawbreakers. But when we pause to consider that these virtues are taught and practiced by our Lord Jesus, then we begin to perceive a world of iron determination and hot passion behind them. These virtues are the things Jesus believed in. They describe his manner of life — a manner of life from which he could not be shaken, yea not even by the Cross.

What I am getting at is this: Even the most lovely and gentle exhortations acquire deeper meaning for us if they come from someone we care about. For example, if my dear old pastor, Raymond Shaheen, of blessed memory, urged me to be content with what I have, it would mean much to me. It would carry more weight than if I had simply read the exhortation from some book. Likewise with my wife Carol, or my mother and father (both of blessed memory), or our mentor, theologian Robert W. Jenson: if any of these people so very dear to me were to urge me onwards in Christian

virtue, their words bear much weight for me, not simply because of what the words say, but also because of who they – these dear ones – are.

How much more, then, should these five Christian virtues acquire weight for us when we pause to consider that it is Jesus who urges them upon us! Why, Jesus is the very Rose of Sharon, the fairest of ten thousand. He is our Good Shepherd, our Great Physician, our Saviour who purchased our lives not with silver and gold, but with his own precious body and blood. Jesus is the one who urges us toward Christian virtue. He is the one who leads us in these paths. And he is the deepest meaning of the virtuous life which we now turn to consider.

The first of the virtues in our text concerns mutual love: Let brotherly love continue. Let sisterly love continue.

I believe that we can see such mutual love here at Immanuel, and it makes the heart of the pastor glad. The grace of mutual conversation and consolation adorns the Christian congregation, from the words of encouragement spoken around the coffee hour tables, to the birthday cards Ann Siemer has sent out to generations of our parish children, to the prayers we send up now for Marie Kohl and Kathryn Weidmann when we hear that they have fallen, to the help our members give one another in packing boxes and moving, to the anonymous gifts of money that are given to

make sure our frail elderly members have heat or food or air conditioning in summer's awful heat.

Echoes of that first Christian congregation still reverberate through the ages, recalling that time when the brothers and sisters in the Lord shared with one another:

⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.(Acts 2:44-47, NRS)

“Let mutual love continue,” urges the apostle. Love means conducting yourself toward the other as if that one were precious... as if you would not have this world to be without that one and that you count that one's well-being as important, not just to him or her, but also to yourself.

Such love asks that we humble ourselves before one another. I believe that that is the principle at work in today's Gospel story about seats at the banquet. Jesus is not urging us to take the lower seat as some kind of *strategy* for being elevated. Rather, he is urging that we seek the lower seat because we are conducting ourselves as if that is where we belong. We would not elevate ourselves above our brothers and sisters in the church.

Such love toward one another is fitting and right to be found in a Christian congregation.

The second virtue commended in our text is hospitality to strangers. This asks that we show the kind of good will that goes beyond our brothers and sisters in the church, beyond our friends and relatives, all the way to the stranger. What a word! Stranger! This person is

“strange” to me. I do know what sort he is! Yet, the exhortation is to show hospitality to that one.

Recall the monastic dormitories and hospitals. Throughout the ages it has been thought proper that the Christian community should exercise ministries of mercy toward the stranger. So, a wayfarer knocks on the door of the monastery, and the brothers let him in, let's her it. The lodgings and fare and medical care they offer might be of a simple sort, but what they can share they do.

Echoes of this ancient hospitality can be seen in just about every congregation's budget, I bet. Rich or poor, most congregations have ministries of compassion, like our “Meals on Heels” program, or they give benevolent contributions to local charities or social service agencies, as we do to “Faith in Action” or “Search and Care.”

Such ministries of mercy mirror the hospitality of Christ toward the strangest of the strange: you and me. For compared to the purity and holiness of Jesus, you and I are very strange indeed. Yet, Jesus died for us that we might find shelter in the mansions of heaven:

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:8, KJV)

If the apostle commends hospitality to strangers, it is because Jesus was first hospitable to us.

The third of our text's virtues is especially interesting when we ponder that the apostle is not speaking of a mere imaginative exercise, but referring to reality:

³Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

This is not imagination, but rather an implication of being a member of the Church, for the Church is the body of Christ. And when one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers:

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.(1 Cor. 12:26)

The teaching and example of Jesus stand firmly behind this call to identify with the suffering of the saints. In our Lord's portrait of the Last Judgment, did not our Lord send off to the left those who failed to have sympathy on the suffering?

⁴¹Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: ⁴²For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: ⁴³I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. ⁴⁴Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? ⁴⁵Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.(Matthew 25:41-45, KJV)

Even in our modern world, there are Christian martyrs. There are persecuted Christians. There are Christians unjustly imprisoned. The apostle asks us to remember them. We are to forget about them as little as we could forget about unjust suffering in ourselves.

I hasten on. Each of these virtues is worthy of its own sermon, its own book, its lifetime of practice. Here I mention only one or two points

about each virtue. Our fourth virtue concerns marriage:

Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled.(Hebrews 13:4)

A gift the Church can offer the world is to hold marriage in high honor, for marriage is a living example for us of the kind of strong and faithful and forgiving love that Christ has for the world. And our world needs living examples of such sturdy love.

Our last virtue this morning is contentment. It is freedom from the grasp of covetousness and greed for money:

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have...(Hebrews 13:5)

Perhaps being content with what we have is the fundamental virtue here. I mean, what ailed Adam and Eve is that they were not content. They might not have been tempted by love of money, for in those innocent days, they probably did not even know of such a thing as money. Yet they were restless with what they had and so they reached for the forbidden fruit. Jesus never did such a thing:

⁹For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.(2 Cor. 8:9, KJV)

Let me close with my earlier theme — my theme about the Teacher of the virtues. Each of these five virtues is its own meditation upon Jesus and upon his way of life. Each virtue is a kind of window into the soul of Jesus.

The adventure of the Christian life is that you and I are invited into this divine manner of life. We are invited to make our own the moral principles that Jesus believes in. And so we have the Epistle's great introduction to the

discussion of the virtues — the introduction that we enjoyed a few Sunday's ago:

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²*looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.(Hebrews 12:1-2)

Notice that wonderful phrase about our Lord's motivation. The apostle phrases it this way: "... who for the sake of the *joy* that was set before him endured the cross..." The apostle speaks of joy. You are that joy! That you should flourish and do well in this world — that is what brings joy to the heart of Jesus. For the sake of that joy, he lived with tremendous self-discipline. And he honors us by inviting us to join him in his manner of life.

To this virtuous One above all those who are virtuous be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.