

A Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinityⁱ

14th June 2020, at Saint John's Church in Savannah

O Lord, my trust is in thy mercy, and my heart is joyful in thy salvation: I will sing unto the Lord, because he hath dealt so lovingly with me. Ps 13:5,6

We are just past the midpoint of the Christian year. From Advent to Trinity we have rehearsed the story of the Son of God's becoming son of Man, so that the sons of men might be made the sons of God. As St. John says, *In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.* It is most certainly the story of God's love for us – and of how we live through him in love. We must consider what it is that brings us to God. Is it fear of hell, as some fundamentalist churches seem to teach? Or is it “all you need is love” as many mainline churches teach? The connection of fear and love is explored in the lessons for his Sunday.

To begin with the gospel lesson, Jesus tells the Pharisees a parable about a rich man, who in this life pleased himself, living in a gated compound, wearing designer threads, with a chef to tickle his taste buds every day. At his gate lay a beggar named Lazarus covered with sores that the feral dogs would lick, who survived on the food thrown into the rich man's garbage. With his resources, and Lazarus lying at his gate, the rich man could have bridged the gap between his wealth and the beggar's misery – but he chose not to. After death, their positions are abruptly reversed - now he is the one in misery, and Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham, in the heavenly banquet of God's holy ones. In his undiminished selfish arrogance he asks Abraham to *send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame* – but it's too late to bridge the gap that he never crossed in his life. As Abraham tells him: *between us and you there is a great gulf fixed* – the rich man must accept the eternal consequences of his choices to live for himself to the point of contempt for God and neighbor.

The parable's warning is evident – those who do not love their neighbour have hell to fear – and it seems to match up with today's epistle, when St. John says *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.* Love made perfect and complete casts out fear of hell, delivers us from its torments, and makes us bold in the day of judgment. Put thus, it sounds like both fundamentalist and liberal have a point – but we have not accounted for all the evidence given us by St. Luke and St. John.

The rich man makes a second arrogant request of Abraham. He thinks if Lazarus comes back from the dead, he will scare his relatives into doing what the Bible says; but Abraham again turns him downⁱⁱ – I think it's because fear of hell will never change the fundamental structures of the heart. Fear of hellfire is good for us when it shatters our complacency, when it makes us see that when we break God's law of love we incur his wrath and risk eternal misery; but if you are only doing good out of fear, then you are not doing it for God's sake, but for your own sake - not to please God, but to preserve yourself. This was the problem of the Pharisees to whom Jesus told this parable - many of them very well off and not known for their charity towards those in need. It's a problem for Pharisees in every age - if you are just being religious and moral to stay out of hell, then you are motivated by love of God, but by love of self. You are not trying to please God - you are trying to preserve yourself.

Only a radical, unconditional, undeserved love can shock our hearts into new life. This how St. John describes it: *Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.* With that one verse, St. John blows up the teaching of the mainline churches, that loving our brothers brings us to God. God does not love us because we loved him - he loves us when we did not love him - he loves us when we were his enemies - and his love took the form of sending *his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.* Propitiation is the action that averts wrath. When the judge in his impartial judicial wrath is going to bring down the hammer on the guilty party, propitiation is what averts that wrath. In our case, it was Christ stepping into our place, taking responsibility for the consequences of the choices we had made to live for

ourselves rather than for God. Which is to say, that on the cross, Jesus descended into hell, Christ suffered the torments of hell - that those who put their trust in him, might share the joys of heaven - and knowing what he suffered for love of sinners, is what stirs us to love of God.

Let me put it thus: if a friend paid a bill for you - how you respond depends on how much the bill was - if he paid the bill for lunch, you would say, my treat next time - but if he paid your student loans, or ten-years of back taxes - you would kiss his feet! My point is this - unless you believe in hell you will never know how much Christ loves you - because on the cross he descended into hell for you - and paid a debt of justice you could never yourself pay in a million years. What he suffered was not mere physical pain, but something much deeper. The deeper a relationship the more devastating is the loss of love. Loss of a distant relative probably leaves you unaffected for long - the loss of a spouse, a child, a close friend - that can be devastating. On the cross the Son of God lost the loving fellowship of the Father which he had known and enjoyed from all eternity. When he cried out, *I thirst* - the Son was experiencing a parching deprivation infinitely greater than we can ever experience - worse than the rich man in the flames of hell, hoping for a few drops of water to cool his tongue.

Christ experienced the loss of God's love, so that we might never be separated from the love of God. If you don't believe in hell - then you cannot know how much it cost God to love you. You are diminishing the love of God - you are turning it into cheap grace - and cheap grace will not regenerate your heart into loving God or your neighbour. But if you do believe in hell, then you know how much it cost Christ to save us, and the more you will know the greatness of God's love for us, the more you will rely on it. As St. John says, *we have known and believed the love that God hath to us*. It is the knowledge that we are loved, however unworthy we may be, all the way through, down to the very heart of our being - that frees us from fear. In the assurance of trust in his love for us we have boldness in the day of judgment - for this is *the perfect love that casts out fear*. And the more you know and rely on the reality of God's love for you - the less you will be daunted and intimidated or intoxicated by the circumstances of your life, both bad and

good. The less you will be governed by your fears and insecurities – and the more you will be motivated to invest your self not in self-preservation but in the service of love. St. John is categorical about the requirement to love: *If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.* That is our calling and destiny, to be transformed by God’s love for us, to realize and fulfill it in our lives in love for one another – and *If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us* – it comes to completion and fulfilment in us. But the power to obey this commandment, is not in us, but in the love that he gives us, and the assurance and security that we have by faith in him. As John says, *We love him, because he first loved us.* And therefore may we learn to say: *O Lord, my trust in thy mercy, and my heart is joyful in thy salvation. I will sing unto the Lord, because he hath dealt so lovingly with me.*

Leviticus 19

Authorized (King James) Version (AKJV)

19 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, ² Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God *am* holy. ³ Ye shall fear every man his mother, and his father, and keep my sabbaths: I *am* the LORD your God. ⁴ Turn ye not unto idols, nor make to yourselves molten gods: I *am* the LORD your God. ⁵ And if ye offer a sacrifice of peace offerings unto the LORD, ye shall offer it at your own will. ⁶ It shall be eaten the same day ye offer it, and on the morrow: and if ought remain until the third day, it shall be burnt in the fire. ⁷ And if it be eaten at all on the third day, it *is* abominable; it shall not be accepted. ⁸ Therefore *every one* that eateth it shall bear his iniquity, because he hath profaned the hallowed thing of the LORD: and that soul shall be cut off from among his people.

⁹ And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. ¹⁰ And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather *every* grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I *am* the LORD your God. ¹¹ Ye shall not steal, neither deal falsely, neither lie one to another. ¹² And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I *am* the LORD. ¹³ Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour, neither rob *him*: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning. ¹⁴ Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I *am* the LORD. ¹⁵ Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: *but* in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour. ¹⁶ Thou shalt not go up and down *as* a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour: I *am* the LORD. ¹⁷ Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him. ¹⁸ Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: *I am* the LORD.

1 John 4:7-21

[BCP:] Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. ⁸ He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. [SM and RM:] ⁹ In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. ¹⁰ Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us,

and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. ¹² No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³ Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. ¹⁵ Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. **[Luther:]** God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. ¹⁷ Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. ¹⁹ We love him, because he first loved us. ²⁰ If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? ²¹ And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also. **[:Luther, SM, RM, BCP]**

Luke 16:19-31

At that time, Jesus spake this parable unto the Pharisees: ¹⁹ There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: ²⁰ and there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, ²¹ and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; ²³ and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. ²⁴ And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. ²⁵ But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. ²⁶ And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that *would come* from thence. ²⁷ Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: ²⁸ for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. ²⁹ Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. ³⁰ And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. ³¹ And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

ⁱ The BCP propers are 1 John 4.7-21; Luke 16.19-31. Sarum and Rome (First Sunday after Pentecost) begins the epistle at v.8; in Luther's sermons the text is rather shorter: 4.16b-21 ("God is love; and he...love his brother also").

ⁱⁱ we may remember that when another Lazarus came back from the dead, it sparked no repentance among the proud, but only excited their determination to kill Jesus