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Proper 14 ... B

"I should lose nothing of all that he has given me"

What is it really like to be human? It has become for too many a work of total self-actualization. It is all about me and what makes me happy and what I think is right and good. And yet, I call myself Christian. What does it mean to be a Christian today? What has it always meant?

Jesus did not live in a Christian world. Jesus lived in a Jewish world and he did not teach Christian ways, he taught God's ways. What is heaven like? It is like Jesus. Can we aspire to that mark? Not at the rate we are going I'm afraid.

A word which was very familiar to Jesus was *"Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what is in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments."* God's way has always been, ALWAYS BEEN, a way of obedience and not a way of pleasing self. God's answers are not quick and painless. They are answers that will teach us and guide us in His love.

Jesus came to do what Israel was supposed to do. He was/is the light of the world. In Him the 'kingdom of heaven' is known most fully. His work was to lead us here that eternal life would be our path forever. He was totally 'obedient' to His Father's wishes. We can not find a word about Jesus that is about 'self.' Could you imagine Jesus saying something bad about someone? Even when he was upset or teaching hard truths he spoke that we might not be 'lost' but rather 'found' in the explanation.

Paul says "*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths...*" and I cannot count the times my mother said to me "If you can't say anything good about someone say nothing at all". Paul teaches us today about using speech constructively at all times. We are to use our speech wisely. It is how Jesus feeds the world through us. N.T. Wright says, "Your tongue gives you the opportunity to bring God's grace to people, by what you say and how you say it..." Jesus tells us in Matthew that we will be held accountable for *'every careless word we utter.'* (Mt.12:36)

Jesus feeds us as we act more like him. What we say is to always be a help and not a hindrance. As we experience controversy in the Church, and we encounter those who disagree with us, before we speak we should revisit the counsel of the Holy Scripture, asking ourselves 'is what I am saying a loving response?' Am I building up the kingdom or am I tearing it down?

Klyne Snodgrass wisely observes, “The body of Christ consists of people who have traded hostility for helpfulness. Christians are builders, not destroyers.” [Finding Our Unity in Scriptures]

Nothing can poison a Christian’s life like anger. One angry person begets another. I have been to too many Christian meetings in recent years where anger seems to carry the day. It stifles any constructive word that can be said. You might say, ‘Well, Jesus got angry.’ Yes, he did but it was a purposeful anger that did not destroy the people but rather lead them to a greater understanding of themselves and God. AND importantly, he did not carry it beyond that teaching moment. Jesus anger built up and did not destroy.

In Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians chapter four verse thirty, the word ‘grieve’ is particularly strong. Paul urges us not to ‘grieve’ the Holy Spirit of God. This is a strikingly personal way to refer to the Spirit. Paul is warning his readers that impure, unhealthy speech ‘grieves’ God Himself. The Holy Spirit is ever present. It guides us to please God not ‘grieve’ Him. Our use of the gift of speech is to be guided by God’s Spirit.

If someone asked you “What is it to be Christian?” You could say , as Paul says in verse 32; “*and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving*

one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” This is the Body of Christ in action. Some translations use the word “*generous*” instead of “*kind*.”

Honey is a whole lot easier to swallow than vinegar. When you are busy spewing vitriolic criticism on everyone or institution in sight it is hard to remember that our Lord’s acts were all those of ‘promoting kindness.’ A Christian community is marked by kindness, generosity and mutual forgiveness. It does not mean that truth is relative or that today’s issues are unimportant. But what is to mark us is our love for one another. We did not learn of forgiveness in a classroom but from the Son of the Living God. We are all “in Christ” regardless of our many faults. Honest, candid study and debate can be carried out in a spirit of love and mutual respect. [Huffstetler] William Barclay puts it well. “...in one sentence, Paul lays down the law of personal relationships --- that we should treat others as Jesus Christ has treated us.” Do you believe that the Holy Scriptures are “The authority of God spoken through the human word?” If so we must pay attention to those words that are even hard to hear when we are in the midst of attack. We are to be kindhearted, to love rather than judge and to maintain a spirit of humility in the quest for truth. These are marks which are essential to our living in community. Jesus ‘new commandment’ is that “we have love for one another.’ Are we obedient to His word?

This important word of Jesus not ‘losing’ us is explained beautifully in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. Verse 32 of chapter 4 this morning ends with these words: “*forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*” We are able to love because ‘He first loved us.’ Jesus forgave us all of our sins and Paul’s call to love is grounded in this word. Jesus was kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving and we are to be no less.

On the news this week in the midst of what one commentator called ‘the preliminary to World War III,’ an amazing event took place. In the city of Haifa a missile from Lebanon landed killing two brothers. A third brother made a difficult decision in making a donation of the organs of his dead brothers that could be salvaged. An Ophthalmologist in Israel asked if he could use the donated eye to save the sight of an Arab man. The brother said yes and an operation took place that saved the man’s sight. The first person the recovered man saw after his surgery was the brother of the two killed by the Arab missile. Both men were overcome by emotion and spoke of something deeper than the current controversy which must take place. There was sincere gratitude and kindness shared by each man. It was a very moving moment and it showed me even briefly that reconciliation is possible in impossible circumstances.

The Holy Spirit of God seeks to change the patterns of human life and make us a reconciling people. If we cannot be reconciled in the Church we do not have a prayer in our world. The Interpreter's Bible says: "Only in the experience of 'sinner forgiven' does Christian agape ever fully appear."

How is the Holy Spirit moving you to be one who forgives? Are you willing to believe the Psalmists word this morning; "*I called in my affliction and the Lord heard me.*" God hears! And God will move us to be the ones He created us to be. Are we willing to be obedient to that word? Will we go on the long journey towards His ways for our Church and our world or is it all about how I feel today?

Let us pray...

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love' and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.