

August 9, 2015 SERMON by Deacon Kevin Kelly

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.

In today's epistle, we hear both about the diversities of gifts, even though we all have the same Holy Spirit. There are diversities of operations, but the same God. Though the gifts and operations are distributed differently, they are for the good of all.

This has certainly been my experience at St. Thomas. I have clearly seen how each of us, and all of us, have contributed to our church, though in different ways, and how we supplement each other in our operations, for the common upbuilding of us all as a church family. Each of us, and each of you, are important and essential. We are each gifted diversely, but each is important. Each one of you can perform things which I can not do, and am not talented to do. And certain things that I can do can be done better by others.

As a deacon, it may appear that I am "second in command." But I do not view it that way. I am not a commander; I am a servant. The word *deacon* in fact comes from a Greek word meaning "servant." It has been a tremendous blessing for me to be part of this community of St. Thomas for the last twenty-some years. I have grown tremendously, and hope that each of you has as well.

As an organic community, there must be something unique or at least different about our community, or else it is superfluous. I feel increasingly strongly, more and more as time goes on, that the world needs Jesus and the Gospel more than anything else, and that the Gospel's tremendous potential for good has been only slightly tapped.

We often hear critics of Bible-centered, traditional Christianity complain that we take the Bible too literally. Many of these critics are unwilling to co-exist with those who think differently from them, and regard us as a threat or at least as an obstacle. I feel that we have not taken the Bible literally enough.

We all know that Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is so well known that even most unbelievers are aware of this teaching. We hear it in our liturgy every Sunday. "Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and

great commandment. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

All Christians give at least lip service to this sublime saying of Jesus. But how many really take it that seriously, especially when such love demands sacrifice or discomfort, or seriously questioning their pre-conceived attitudes? A prominent secular humanist named John Dunphy once remarked that the Christian ethic of "love thy neighbor" was never a reality. John Wesley once remarked that in any Christian city only about one person in 500 takes Jesus' command to radical discipleship seriously. And one prominent British Christian, I believe it was G. K. Chesterton, once said that Christianity has never been disproved, but only never really tried.

I am reminded of a story that I read in the early 1980's in a conservative Christian publication, *The New Oxford Review*. Its contributors were variously American and British, and were variously Anglican and Catholic. I do not remember all the details, but in this story an angel materialized and visited an Englishwoman who was a faithful, devout Christian. He spoke to her about "love and peace." She inappropriately replied, "Love and peace-those are pinko terms." What a strange thing for any Christian to say! What about the aforementioned Great Commandment in our liturgy, which appears in both Testaments? What about the verse that appears twice in the 1st Epistle of John: "God is love."

Over the last three weeks, I have gained the confidence to start assisting with distributing the cup at Communion. It took me awhile to memorize the formula, and I probably still do not get every word exactly correct. This has been a big blessing to me to say: "The blood of Christ, which was shed for thee, bring thee body and soul unto everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ's blood was shed for thee, and be thankful." It is an incalculable blessing to know that Jesus shed his body and blood for me, and for every other human being. He loves each of us more than we will ever know.

We have many responsibilities before both God and humanity. Jesus told his Apostles to preach the Gospel to every creature. It is a gospel of grace and love. I want every human being to know and feel the deep love that God has for them through Jesus Christ.

God does not call everyone to be a missionary to Haiti or Peru or Mozambique or somewhere else. But he does call all of us to share his love with others. We are all called and gifted in that regard. Outside our door is a needy and broken world that needs Jesus and the Gospel more than anything. We each and all, not just the clergy, can bring God's love to others. You can reach certain people that I cannot reach, both through a verbal witness and a non-verbal witness; through transformed lives that are radically different. Jesus once said, "let your light shine before [others] so that they may see goodness in your works and give thanks to your heavenly Father."

In today's Gospel reading, we read about Christ's prophesy of the doom of Jerusalem. This demise would be tragic, and it was also tragic how the city had rejected Jesus and his message. The pride, hard hearts, jealousy, unbelief, and hypocrisy of most of Jesus' contemporaries has led to this tragedy, because "thou knewest not the time of thy visitation." God wants everyone, no matter how sinful, evil or depraved, to know about his love and grace for them all, and to repent from their sins, for which Jesus died as an atonement, to be forgiven, healed, and transformed by his LOVE.

We must recall the proper definition of GRACE. This grace is God's freely bestowed, undeserved favor for sinful humanity, which no one merits, no matter how admirable they may otherwise be, and which is offered to even the most evil of sinners. Even the saintliest among us do not deserve it, and we must be humble about our reception of it, and must strive to let it transform us.

A couple of years ago I often logged on to a highly secular news website which had a section on religion. Persons could contribute their opinions freely. The biggest complaint about Christians was that they were hypocritical. They were too politically exclusive, or were too exclusive in other ways. Even though I disagreed with most of what I viewed on this site, it was a growing experience for me. Reaching out to the world is not an option. It is Christ's command. God's love is anything but exclusive. Jesus knocked down the barrier between Jew and Gentile, to include all in God's offer of salvation.

And, as I have said before, READ THOSE SCRIPTURES! At least the New Testament. The values that we encounter in the news media and the

entertainment industry are often very far from the values of the Word of God.
The scriptures are God's love letter to you and to all humanity!

(Trinity)