

13th Sunday of Pentecost

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Like the last few weeks, today's Epistle reading is again taken from St. Paul's first letter to the newly established Christian community in Corinth. In fact, today we heard the very end of that letter.

Now we've already spoken of how this new community in Corinth struggled to remain united to each other, to remain undivided and of like mind in their following of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And we've seen how St. Paul advised them to do two things to fix this dangerous problem.

First, St. Paul told them to lay aside those things which divided them – the pursuit of power, the desire for riches, and the love of pleasure. And he told them not to seek after these things because not only are they fading away, temporal, and corruptible but they also lead to divisions within the Body of Christ.

This of course is confirmed by St. James the first bishop of Jerusalem in his own Epistle when he says that the cause of all fighting and hostility is nothing other than egotistical desires and the lusts of the earth; those desires and lusts which belong to the old man, the man who is unregenerated, the man who is still subject to sin because he had not yet fully died and risen with Jesus Christ.

And so, St. Paul told the Corinthians that the first step in becoming a fully established Christian community was to lay aside those egotistical desires which lead to division – the desire for power, riches, and pleasure.

Now according to St. Paul, the second step was to live in the context of the Resurrection, to always have one's focus set on the eternal Kingdom of God. It is this focus alone which could unite the community, because it is this kingdom alone which is established through peace, brotherly love, and self-sacrifice. And then St. Paul goes on to show the community that if they were to live in this manner, exhibiting this peace, brotherly love and self-sacrifice, they would not only avoid divisions and be united as the Lord's disciples, but that they would also become His Apostles because others would see the power of the faith – a faith in action – and thereby many would be drawn to Christ.

And so, having fully described these two steps – that is how to die to the ways of the world and how to live for the Kingdom of God – St. Paul finally ends his letter. And he does so with the words, "Watch, stand fast, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love." It was these characteristics which the little mission in Corinth needed to develop if it was going to grow into a thriving church community witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

They needed to watch, and watch in a two-fold sense: that is each member needed to be attentive to not only to what was going on within their community, but also to what was going on within their own mind and heart. This is because St. Paul knew that there are many temptations which face a young community, both externally and internally.

Now anyone who has ever been affiliated with a mission community knows that the external challenges are often times very great and imposing, such as the difficulty of building a new church, meeting the financial needs of the community, or ministering to the needs of the poor. But the person of experience also know that the internal challenges can be even more difficult because they center on what happens in our minds and hearts. And what happens in our minds and hearts effects the way we deal with one another. How well do we know that if we allow ourselves to fall into anger, divisiveness, or ill will in our thinking then it will also manifest itself in our words and actions?

This is why St. Paul also mentions the need to stand fast, be brave, and be strong – to stand fast in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to show courage when dealing with challenges which face the community, and to be strong in the faith that no matter what temptations or trials afflict the community, the Lord will provide the way through them, the Lord Himself will protect and guide His Church.

And then in the second half of his statement, St. Paul gives the final guiding principle, the main overarching rule, the most important necessity. He says, “Let all that you do be done with love” that is, let your primary motive, your reason for saying or doing anything at all, whether inside or outside the community, be love.

Of course, as Christians this is a no-brainer, we all know that everything we do must be done in love. After all, the first commandment is to love God and the second is to love one’s neighbor, and the Lord says that it is by this love that all men will know that we are His disciples.

However, St. Paul ends his letter with these words, not because we haven’t heard them before, but because love is something which we often think we are practicing but we are not. Likewise, love is something which we sometimes think others are lacking but they are not. In this manner, love seems to be somewhat illusive, we may think we have it or we may think others don’t, but most times, if we are truly honest, we don’t really know.

This is especially the case when love appears as tough love. When we have to hold a firm line, doing what is right and best for the ones we care about. Rather than simply giving them what they want and thereby serving as enablers as they head down the wrong path. We all know this type of love. As children we resisted it, thinking that it wasn’t love at all. Yet as adults, we have come to understand that without this type of love, without tough love, not only would our families become dysfunctional but the world itself would fall apart. Without tough love what would happen to our society, to our legal system, to our correctional institutions, or even to our churches?

And so love is not so easily identified, especially tough love. And St. Paul knew this better than most. In fact for this reason he gave the Corinthians certain criteria to identify when love was present and when it was not.

In the 13th chapter of this same Epistle to the Corinthians he says, “Love has patience, is kind; love is not envious, is not vain, is not puffed up; love does not behave indecently, does not seek her own, love is not easily provoked, thinks no evil. Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices in the truth, love quietly covers all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”

This is the criteria by which we can know if we are acting in love, if we have the right motives. Or vice versa, if we are acting without love, if our intentions are something less than they should be.

Now in today’s Gospel reading the Lord gives us a parable about how one’s motives and intentions effect one’s stewardship, one’s service to the Lord. In the parable He explains how a vineyard was leased out to stewards who were to return the fruits of the vineyard to the owner.

The Lord used this parable to illustrate the unfaithfulness of the Old Testament Jewish people. For the Jews were given stewardship of the Lord’s House, they had entered into a special covenant with God. And in this covenantal relationship they were to offer God the fruits of righteousness and upright living, while God was to offer them the Prophets and finally the Messiah, the Savior of the world, His Own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now as the parable explains, the Jewish people, the stewards of the vineyard, not only lived unlawfully, keeping the fruits of the vineyard for themselves, but they also beat, killed, and stoned the prophets who the Lord sent to them. And finally in an attempt to steal the inheritance of the vineyard, they even killed the Owner’s own son, the Lord Jesus, by casting Him out of the vineyard and putting Him to death on the Cross.

Brothers and sisters, why were the Jewish people so unfaithful in their stewardship? Why did they fail to exhibit love to the Lord, His prophets, and finally His only Son?

Quite simply it was because they wanted the vineyard for themselves – they were overcome by the desire for power, riches, and pleasure – they lusted for the things of the earth – those things which St. James says lead to nothing but fighting, hostility, and even in some cases murder. And for this, the Jews lost their covenant with the Lord, they walked out on the special relationship they had enjoyed with Him, and they suffered destruction. And as the parable says, “the Owner leased his vineyard to other vinedressers who would render to him the fruits in their seasons.”

Now one does not have to be a Biblical scholar to know that we, the Christian people, are the new stewards of the Lord’s vineyard. We are those who have been called to serve in God’s House, His Church, rendering to Him the fruits of righteousness, the fruits of the Spirit. This was the task of the community in Corinth so many years ago, and this our task today.

Brothers and sisters, our Lord wants His vineyard to flourish, and He wants us to labor together as His stewards.

Let us not fall into the same mistakes as the Jewish people. Let us remember that we, as stewards of the Lord's house, are His servants and He is our Master. He is the head of our Church and we are His members. It is not the other way around. And each us must willingly fulfill his or her own duty with watchfulness, courage, strength, and most of all love.

If we truly commit ourselves to these things not only will we overcome all divisiveness and enjoy peaceful unity but we will also be transformed from disciples to apostles and our small mission parish will grow into a thriving Christian community. But if we do not commit ourselves to these things, or if we commit only half-heartedly, then we will suffer the consequences of the Jewish people who lost their place as stewards of the Lord's vineyard.

Let us choose wisely, and let us thereby serve the Lord, the One Who calls us to unity on earth and eternal peace and joy in His Heavenly Kingdom in the Age to come.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!