

## United to One Another in Pure Affection

Every once in a while when I start preparing for Sunday, I get stopped at the Collect for the Day. Even though I've seen it every year, sometimes it speaks to me more powerfully than usual. So I preach on it. I've found that preaching on the Collect can be risky. Once someone assumed that I hadn't bothered to prepare a sermon and I was winging it. I guess he expected quotations from learned commentaries on the day's scripture lessons. Anything else was insufficient.

Well, this week was one of those times when the Collect stopped me. In case you forgot it, let's hear it again:

O God, you have taught us to keep all of your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another in pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

At first glance it's pretty straightforward. Love God and love your neighbor. That's simple enough. It's the application that arrests me. We pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit so that we can be *devoted to God with our whole heart* and *united to one another with pure affection*. This year I realized that that is exactly what we are *not* doing. We are not united to one another. There is hardly any affection, let alone pure affection. And I am quite sure that the reason is limited devotion to God.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the human condition is our inability to do what we know is right. There is disagreement about what "right" means, but by and large most of us are on the same page about the essentials, as expressed in our baptismal covenant: resisting evil, seeking and serving Christ, striving for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being. That is what we would like to do. Where we fall down, often miserably and disastrously, is between the desire and the action.

St. Paul knew about that human condition all too well. He didn't have to look any farther than himself. In his letter to the Romans that we heard this morning he is very direct. We have all had times when we can say, "I do not understand my own actions." We know the experience of watching ourselves do what we do not want to do, and regretting it later. That makes us wretched -- or at least it should.

Jesus, too, knows of two-mindedness, though not in himself. He has watched the people complain about John the Baptist because he fasted and was a teetotaler. He has

heard them complain about himself because he ate and drank with the riff-raff. No wonder he compared the people with children who couldn't be satisfied.

At first glance, the story from Genesis seems to be an exception to this rule. Abraham's servant is very devoted to God as well as his master. He continually invokes God's help in finding a wife for Isaac. God responds by helping him find Rebekah. By the end of the passage she is united to Isaac with pure affection.

Those who know more of this story, however, know of the deceit and trickery to come. Jacob, the younger son of Isaac and Rebekah, will cheat his older brother Esau out of his birthright. Jacob will flee to Laban, Rebekah's brother, who will cheat Jacob over the course of twenty years. The whole story shows more of the true human condition than it does so-called "family values."

If that's the human condition, where does affection come from? Who can rescue us from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord, Paul cries out. Thanks be to God for the Holy Spirit that gives us the grace to love.

I've often quoted Teresa of Avila, the great sixteenth-century mystic, in talking about love of God and neighbor. Teresa had a strong personality like Paul. She lived among nuns whom she loved and who drove her crazy -- in other words, a typical church community. What she realized is that it was very easy to convince herself that she was growing in love of God, whom she could not see. But she could have no illusions about whether she was growing in love of those around her.

Teresa's insight is useful for us. We can be sure that if we are not united to one another with pure affection that we are not devoted to God with our whole heart. The two are directly connected. If one is defective, so is the other.

Jesus knew that. That's why he linked love of God and neighbor together in the first place. That's why he said to pray for our enemies. That's why he prayed "Father, forgive them" from the cross. We know that Jesus wants us to do more than we think we are able to do. That's why our response to the baptismal promises is "I will, with God's help."

So the next time you are tempted to condemn someone, pray for them. Pray that you will hear them, and they will hear you. Yes, there is evil in the world, and we are to resist it. But the hardest evil to resist is the evil within ourselves. It lies close at hand, prowling around. Pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit to resist it. Then and only then will you find rest for your souls.