

Sermon - 07-11-21
2 Sam 6:1-5, 12b-19; Ps 24;
Eph 1:3-14; Mk 6:14-29
7th Sun after Pentecost
The Praise of His Glory

This past week, I have been looking for a handle on living to the praise of God's glory. The Apostle Paul teaches that we bear the seal of the Holy Spirit. So, we continue to dwell in God's promises.

Bernard of Clairvaux is a 12th c AD father of the church. He founded the Cistercian Order and planted around seventy monasteries. He taught his followers, and his words still teach us about "love rightly ordered." He named the Four Degrees of Love, each degree becoming more genuine and more Christlike over time. Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...And...you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mt 22:37-39)

First, remember yourself as a young child. You were a little child once. You and I cried and cried when we were hungry, thirsty, uncomfortable, and mysteriously sometimes for no apparent reason. We cried out for our needs – and as toddlers we continued to seek our own satisfaction and pleasure. This is okay and even endearing to the adults in a child's life. Princess Charlotte of England once looked into the cameras of the reporters outside the church where her little brother, Prince Louis, had just been baptized. She said, "You're not coming!" She meant the reporters were not invited in for cake and punch after the service. It was cute. She was not about to share the cake. Charlotte was three years old. In a person of age 12 – or 20 – or 30 it is no longer endearing. That self-centered behavior is evidence that the person has not grown or matured in their heart and soul. The first degree of love is love of self for our own sakes. This is selfish love. In adults, this degree of love causes destruction if it breaks out and spreads across the landscape of our lives. It produces pain and misery for self and others. Most of us outgrow this degree of love, when we hear and accept that God loves us. God loves us so much that He sent His only Son, Jesus, to bear our sins & pay the penalty of death for us.

In this way, by the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we enter the second degree of love – we love God for the sake of ourselves. We understand the potential to get blessings, provision, needs and wants fulfilled by the Lover of our soul. Beware, for we can come to see

God as our valet – our servant. I remember going Christmas shopping with my friends in mid-high. We shopped for ourselves first – then quickly picked up small gifts for those on our list with the leftover money. Not generous, not attractive, but there you have the second degree of love: loving God for our own sakes. This can lead to a kind of "name it and claim it" faith. We ask God for things usually – or for God to change somebody else to suit us. Janis Joplin famously wrote, "Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz. My friends all drive Porches, I must make amends..." We become more and more dependent upon God and we thank God for His kindness to us.

But the blessed Holy Spirit does not give up on us. The Spirit continues gently to woo us. Through the means of grace: prayer and fasting, Scripture study and memorization, joining together with the saints and participating in the sacraments, doing deeds of mercy – we receive a vision and understanding of God's kingdom and glory. We encounter the living Christ – we awaken to His perfect goodness and holy love. Here, we are enfolded into the body of Christ. We begin to experience and dwell in His glory. We come to trust completely "a love so profound that nails cannot destroy it; taunting cannot weaken it; hatred cannot overcome it." (Ken J Collins 2013 lecture) We fall in love with Jesus and love God for God's sake. We have entered the third degree of loving. The Holy Spirit sets up permanent residence within us. We have tasted the sweetness of fellowship with Jesus. David wrote in Ps 34, "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in Him." (v 8)

To recap:

1st degree of love – love of self for our own sake – toddler love

2nd degree of love – loving God for our own blessing – mid-high love

(Continued on next page.)

3rd degree of love – loving God for God’s sake – intimacy with our Lord

Bernard asks, “When will my soul, inebriated with divine love, learn to be unconsciously self-forgetful, and simply be a broken vessel?” In Ps 31 David prays, “My times are in Your hand (O Lord); ...Let Your face shine upon Your servant; save me in your steadfast love.” (v 15-16). The Apostle Paul teaches, “...anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.” (1 Cor 6:17)

Bernard of Clairvaux continues, “Blessed and holy is the one who has been privileged, even if only momentarily in this life, to taste of this love...In God all our affections should center, so that in all things we should seek to do only His will and not to please ourselves. True blessing will come to us then, not in self-gratification, nor in transient pleasure, but in accomplishing God’s will in us. We begin to really pray: “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” (Mt 6:10).”

Recall that Bernard was a monastic, and in fact a very observant friar who fasted and kept prayer vigil so strenuously that his health was impaired. I do not believe God calls us to this – or if God does, He provides for us to walk in divine health in spite of our ascetic practice.

God calls the saints to experience this fourth degree of love: Loving self for God’s sake. We become instruments of God’s peace. Bernard calls this being united with God’s love. Agape love – unconditional love.

John of Patmos dwelt here. The Prophets Ezekiel and Zechariah lived out this degree of love. John Wesley, the very practical minister of God’s grace, lived here. Many other saints, some we have never heard of also dwell in union with God’s love.

“Conversion is going on all the time within us and within the world. While the change of turning toward God may seem like a once-in-a-lifetime experience, it is really a continual process. Following Jesus is not a sprint, it is a marathon. We may think that we have turned fully toward God; then we discover another dimension of God, and we know immediately that more conversion is possible and necessary if we are to move Godward in all of life.” –Rueben P. Job (*A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*)

I pray today that we persist in seeking God and that the Holy Spirit draws us into a life in praise of His glory. Amen.