

The Twenty-Second Sunday after Trinity
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

COMPLETING THE GOOD WORK BEGUN

Philippians 1:3-11

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are now approaching the end of the Church Year. The thoughts in the Lessons and Propers turn our eyes more and more to the end of things, to the end of life, and finally to the end of this creation on the Last Day. Hence, one of the main themes that finds its way into the service is that of perseverance in faith and completion of that faith already begun in us by the grace of God.

This is one of the themes addressed by St. Paul in his Epistle to the Philippians and in the Epistle lesson this morning. Paul begins with thanksgiving for the beginnings the Lord has made with the congregation in Philippi: "I thank God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now..." The reason that Paul is thankful is that the congregation there has "fellowship in the gospel." Paul means by this that they share the same faith as he himself has. He means that they are all believers in Christ Jesus and that in their belief, in their common confession of faith, they have fellowship with Christ and with each-other. Paul says that He is joyful over this. These people have received his preaching and come to faith by hearing the Word. And they have remained faithful from their Baptisms till the time Paul wrote.

But Paul is not content to leave them with the beginnings of the faith. He prays also: "that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." The Philippians had the beginnings of the good work of salvation. They believed in Christ. They were washed in the flood of Baptism; cleansed with His blood; and justified by their faith given to them by the grace of God. But this, according to Paul was just the beginning of the good work God was performing in them. Something that needed to be completed. Paul was not content to leave them with the beginnings of faith. He wants to move them to growth in Christ and maturity in faith and holiness.

So what was it that needed completing? It was not their justification, that is, their being saved. That was completed once and for all by Christ in His sacrifice on the cross. By His life, death, and resurrection in our place, that task of defeating our sins is finished. All the sins ever committed in this world are forgiven in that one event. That is why, in the prayer of the Church which we pray each Sunday, we call Christ "the Savior of all men, especially of them that believe." For this once and for all sacrifice of Christ must be applied to the individual by faith. Christ has already forgiven the sins, but that forgiveness must be received, through Baptism, through the proclaimed Word of God, through Absolution, through the Holy Communion. And it must also be appropriated by faith. Faith says Amen to what Christ has done. But where there is no faith, there is rejection of the gift of forgiveness already won by Christ.

This was not the problem in Philippi. They have faith. The good work is already begun in them. They have had Christ's forgiveness applied to them in the Word and Sacraments. This is not what needed to be completed.

What needed completing was their conformity to Christ. They needed to grow in faith and in Christ-likeness. Paul writes that He is praying on their behalf for several things related to this. He begins: "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and discernment..." The first thing here is growth in love. Love is one of the most important fruits of the Spirit which is to manifest in the life of the Christian. It is one of the main points in which we are to conform to Christ, who out of love for us came into the world and out of love gave Himself over to death in our place. Time and again we hear from the Scriptures that we are to show forth love. In I Thessalonians, Paul prays that the Lord would make us, "increase and abound in love to one another and to all." Paul even says, in that famous chapter of I Corinthians that of faith, hope, and love; love is the greatest. St. John says: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God." Then he goes so far as to say: "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love." Likewise, Peter and James and the other Apostles also extol us to love others as Christ has loved us. This is something in which all Christians are to grow.

Likewise we are to grow in knowledge and discernment which are to guide our love. We are not to be content with simply knowing the bare facts of the Gospel. We are to take the Gospel and grow in it, searching the Scriptures, studying the Word, hearing it preached and explained. When we grow in the knowledge of God's grace and will, then we also gain discernment. This means that we begin to be able to judge things according to the truth of God's Word. Paul says: "that you may approve the things that are excellent." Love, knowledge, and discernment, are to lead us to approve the excellent things God has given us and has in store for us. They are to lead us again and again first to His Word and to the Sacrament of the Altar, the excellent means of grace our Lord has given us. They are also to lead us to study, to prayer, and to good works, which are the excellent God given responses to His grace.

Paul also prays: "that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ..." Two things are mentioned here, sincerity and lack of offense; two sides, really, of the same coin. Sincerity involves your confession. Being sincere means being true to your beliefs, true to your creed. It means remaining faithful. This is why a person's confession of faith is so important. It is necessary that we actually believe what we say we do. And the flip side of confession is action. If we are really sincere, our confession will bear itself out in the way we live our lives. And if we are sincere in action, we will not offend against God or neighbor. Instead we will do what we say we ought to do, loving and serving both God and fellow human being. Paul prays that we maintain that sincerity of confession and deed until the day Christ returns; that is, that we persevere to the end in faith and in doing good works.

Lastly, he sums up all of these petitions by praying that the congregation be: "filled with the fruits of righteousness..." These things that we have been speaking about, love, knowledge, discernment, approval of excellence, sincerity and lack of offense, are fruits of righteousness. They are the results of having been made righteous by Christ. They are the results of faith. Paul prays that the congregation be filled with these fruits.

This is quite a tall order for the Christian to fill. It was for the Philippian and it is for us today as well. Hearing this list of things, one realizes how far from the mark one really is. We see that we haven't always loved as we should; that we haven't always sought God's wisdom and knowledge; that we haven't always been interested in discerning God's will; that we have at times rejected the excellent things which God wishes to give us in Word and Supper, prayer and study, and good works; that we haven't always been sincere and that we have often given offense to God and man.

It is clear that we are not able to live up to God's expectations on our own. We are told by Paul to strive for these things. And we should try with all of our might to bear these fruits of righteousness. This is the duty of the new man, the Christian within us. But unfortunately, that old sinful man fights against us as we have been hearing these past weeks. And he makes it impossible for us to bear these fruits completely.

So how can we make progress in the faith? How can we grow? First, we must continue to try. Too often we are tempted to simply lie back and do nothing, to simply take Christ's forgiveness and continue on in our old ways. The Scriptures exhort us to the contrary. They say, yes receive the forgiveness of Christ, but go with that forgiveness and fight even harder against sin and unbelief, letting the Word of Christ have its way with you.

Second, we must turn again and again to the strength the Lord offers to us in His means of grace. Throughout the Epistle lesson, Paul anchors all of this growth and perseverance in grace. First He thanks God for the grace the Philippians received in the Gospel. Then He calls the Philippians "partakers with me of grace." Then He concludes his prayer by saying that all of these fruits of righteousness are, "by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

So the real source of the fruits of righteousness, is Jesus Christ, who is our Righteousness. It is His power which brings about the growth and perseverance Christians are to exhibit. Christ began this good work in us in Baptism, giving us the forgiveness won by Him on the cross and changing us fundamentally, creating a new righteous man. Paul indicates here that it is also Christ who completes the good work. His prayer is that: "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." God began it, God also must complete it.

He does so, when we partake of His grace. Through these means, through the Word preached, through Absolution proclaimed, through Body and Blood eaten and drunk, God continues the work He began in us at Baptism. In these He applies again and again that forgiveness won by Christ. And in these He continues to make us righteous. And this is the source of the fruits that are to be born, which are even called fruits of righteousness. And with this grace the new man is given the power to fight the good fight of faith, and to grow in love, in knowledge, in discernment, in choosing God's excellence, in sincerity, and in behavior that is without offense. This is why when praying the Collect today we called God, "our Refuge and Strength, the Author of all godliness..." We are to fight and to strive, but He is the source, the Author of our righteousness and also of the fruits of righteousness we are to bear. May God who has begun the good work in us also complete it and make us to persevere until the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen..

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠