

The Second Sunday after Epiphany

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Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.

Human beings are social beings, scientists tell us. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle is famous for having said “man is a political animal”. What he meant by that is that human beings naturally live in organized societies rather than in chaos. If the social scientists are correct, none of us really desires to be entirely alone. Rather, our naturally social nature, which the Bible would describe as coming from God’s intention in creating human beings as naturally dependent upon each other, urges us to cleave to each other closely and find both our joy and strength in the company of others.

What does this mean for the conduct of Christian life? What does this mean when we consider not just what human beings *tend* to do but what human beings *ought* to do? St. Paul, in the twelfth chapter of his letter to the Romans, runs through the different gifts that various people in the Church have received from God. In this very famous passage, St. Paul describes, first, a variety of gifts that God might grant to His creatures, then he stops and offers the command with which this sermon began.

Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.

After that command, he follows with a number of instructions on how we ought to be close, supportive and loving toward our fellow Christians. So, the passage goes from a description of the capabilities of human beings, to a command to make judgments among the things that confront us, and concludes with an instruction to treat those around us with love and patience. What does this sequence show us?

The first thing we see, of course, is that human beings display a great variety of gifts and abilities. We are not all the same and so, therefore, there will, inescapably, be differences of all kinds between us. These differences need not, necessarily, involve differences of value or goodness but there is no question that differences are part of the human landscape. Secondly, we are instructed by the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament, to make a distinction between what is good and what is bad and to avoid the bad and try to stay close to the good. Lastly, the expectation for the basis of human interaction inside the Church is one that finds its ground and beginning in love.

... be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love...

This is where we begin, but it is not where we end. Brotherly love is a powerful and constant thing, but it does not produce a single and constant series of actions and attitudes between the one who loves and the one who is loved. After all, when you

love someone like a brother, you wish them all the best. Sometimes, wishing someone “all the best” means that you try to further their endeavors as much as you possibly can. At other times, wishing someone “all the best” means that you try to convince them to change what they are trying to do. At still other times, wishing someone “all the best” means that you try to *prevent* them from succeeding in what they are doing and stop them and turn them onto a different path. All of these possible reactions stem from the same source, the brotherly love that you feel toward the other person, but they may issue in completely opposite forms of behavior. These different expressions of the same brotherly love are, themselves, based on judgments of what is good and bad, advantageous or disadvantageous, desirable or undesirable among the things that your brother is attempting to do.

We heard a very moving and long passage from the eighth chapter of *The Book of the Prophet Zechariah* today for our lesson. The young and the old are out in the streets together, happily enjoying a beautiful Mediterranean city scene. Those who are in the city are happily worshiping the Lord and those who are coming from afar off, even from beyond the bounds of Israel, are coming to worship the Lord in this happy, safe, peaceful and reverent society. This is exactly the kind of “city on a hill” that William Bradford hoped that the Massachusetts Bay colony would be and that Ronald Reagan hoped the United States would be. Who would not want to live in a place like that? I would! This is surely a picture of the ideal human society that the Bible is teaching us, and urging us, to create. The difficult question is, however, how are we to conduct ourselves so that the society in which we live will grow closer and closer to that ideal?

To begin where St. Paul begins, human beings have different abilities and different backgrounds. This means that each one of us is moving through life on a slightly different path. None of us has exactly the same history, abilities and opportunities that others do, so each of us is involved in a unique attempt to live a Christian life in the world. Because of this, each one of us is uniquely precious to *God* as His creature as well as being uniquely precious to the Church as an irreplaceable branch on the vine or an irreplaceable Lamb in the flock. Not a single one of us can be lost without both God and the Church missing us and feeling our absence.

Secondly, each of us is instructed to use his best judgment in disapproving of, and distancing ourselves from, what is evil, while clinging to what is good as closely as we can. This is a general command, couched in the broadest possible terms, so it must apply to the *things* that we do or choose not to do, the *people* whom we meet and either spend time with or avoid, and the *situations* in which we might find ourselves.

Thirdly, we are instructed to behave ourselves inside the Christian community as if we were in the midst of a loving family. We are to look after the good of others before ourselves; we are to put up with them when they are difficult; we are to take care of them when we have an opportunity to do so.

This is the point at which the different pieces begin to come together. In order for us *really* to look after each other as members of a loving family do, we cannot just applaud whatever anyone does. We must give real thought and exercise independent judgment about whether or not we think our fellow Christians are headed on the right path. In other words, we are not only being instructed to *love* each other, we are also being instructed to *help* each other by pushing along the things that are good and by trying to rein in or bring to an end the things that are bad. We are to be as much like

parents to each other as we are to be like brothers and sisters to each other, in the sense that we have a responsibility to try to guide those whom we see have gone wrong and to try to encourage those who are headed on the right path.

Making moral judgments, then, is not something that reveals us to be hypocritically self-satisfied and self-interested people. It is, instead, a necessary part of our loving involvement in the naturally social aspects of living human life as a Christian. We cannot love others without discernment. We cannot live morally in the world without making good judgments about what is good or bad for *others*, as individuals, and what is good or bad for others, as a whole *society*. All of this is, of course, also bound up with the fact that we must always make moral judgments where our own private lives are concerned. None of us is ever exempt from that.

Just as we must use our minds to reflect on the things we do in order to make certain that they follow Christian patterns, so must we also use our minds to reflect on what we see those around us doing. This is not an exercise of lordship or pride, it is a necessary aspect of love. The lack of willingness by people in our society to make reasonable judgments in their relations with others is one of the blind spots in our current worldview. Only when we can convince the majority of those in our culture to begin to make loving judgments in their daily lives will there be hope for the increase of the Christian character of our culture. So, we need to do more than make judgments in our own lives; we need to do so, as a community that takes care of its members, in a way that is successful enough, and evident enough, to help those around us begin to see the need for this discernment in their own lives.

As is so often true for Christians, our lives will be our most effective sermons. If we can live loving Christian lives in a way that those around us notice, we can hope that our efforts will encourage them along similar lines. The sight of happy, peaceful, loving Christians living responsible lives in the midst of their society ought to appeal to those non-Christians around them with open minds and pure hearts. It is certainly our duty to make an effort to do this for our fellow human beings. It is, perhaps, one of the most *selfless* things Christians can do rather than one of the most *selfish* ones. Christians tend to want to be private about their faith in our society, but how private can we be if only being noticed can help our non-Christian fellows? It is a puzzle to know exactly what to do and how to begin, but the task seems pretty definite. We must be brave and we must be determined but we must also be humble and loving. In other words, as is so often true, we must act like Jesus! That is what the world needs from us, just as it always does.