

“Built Up in Christ’s Perfect Love”

The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany - Homily by: Fr. Gary W. Thurman

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Cathedral of the King

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Sunday, February 19, 2017: The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Leviticus 19: 1-2; 9-18/Psalm 119: 33-38/1 Corinthians 3: 10-15/Matthew 5: 38 - 48

Fr. Gary W. Thurman

Bishop Ariel:

Why are we here today at Church? We are not here for a meeting or an assembly, but for an encounter with God Himself to grow in the knowledge of Him. I like how a certain group called their encounter, “A Family Appointment with El Shaddai.” As members of the Cathedral of the King, in everything we do, we are designed to know God and to make a Him known. The leadership would want your faith not to rest on the wisdom of man, but on the power of God. We give you actions, words in demonstration of the Spirit.

Today, God will speak. He has been speaking while you were asleep, from the moment that you woke up. Right now, God will speak in demonstration of the Spirit through the homily of Fr. Gary. The Word of the Lord will be spoken today and I want you to listen. I have heard this message and it is for every one of us. This is timely; this is God speaking, so incline your ear. Do not be hung up on the medium or the instrument. Focus on what God is speaking to us for what is more important is the message rather than the messenger. Listen with open hearts and ears, and let the Holy Spirit speak to you.

Fr. Gary W. Thurman:

For most people, when they hear the Gospel reading, their first reaction would probably be, “Is Jesus serious? What is He asking of us? He says, ‘If somebody hits us, let them hit us again. If somebody steals our inner garment, give our outer garment, too. If somebody forces us to go a mile, go with him twice as much.’” Then, Jesus gets really weird. At the end of the gospel, He says, “Be perfect.” We have spent most of our lives excusing ourselves saying, “Well, nobody is perfect.” Has anybody argued with us when we said that? Jesus asks us many things, and the end is the awesome command, “Be perfect, after all, God is perfect.”

We take the Gospel reading in three parts: a part for those people who mistreat you; a part about loving your enemies; and the part about being perfect. This is the wrong approach for it is all one topic. It is a progression. First, Jesus shows us our response for those who mistreat us. Then, He shows us the way to accomplish this response, which is love, and in

the same context of love, Jesus says, “Be perfect.” Love is what brings perfection. Love is what God makes perfect. He is perfect because He is love.

Society today do not understand this. It doesn’t see turning the other cheek as being love. They don’t see holding back and not giving revenge as love and think that as weakness. I guess you did not get a Valentine Card saying, “I love you, darling, hit me on the face.” Or a husband sending a Valentine Card to his wife saying, “Here, darling, take my shirt.” This is what Jesus calls love, but society has a different idea of love and justice. We just don’t sit around and let people do what they want to do to us and respond in kindness. We respond in kind, not in kindness. We think it is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. We are talking about here is divine love.

The reading in Leviticus talks about how to treat your neighbor. Jesus says to do this, but go beyond, even to your enemy. He says that love is the way to achieve perfection. Be perfect because the Father is perfect. If we don’t understand this, this is talking about the love that forgives, the love that doesn’t hold grudges, and the love that reaches out even to the enemies. It is through God’s love that we are perfected and this is why Jesus can say, “Be perfect as God is perfect.”

1John 4 shows how love and perfection go together. From verse 12, “No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.” See how love and perfection is tied together. God’s love is perfected in us. Love is what perfects us. The Old Testament reading says, “Be holy for God is holy.” Holiness will not perfect us. What God is saying is that we will be perfected in love.

Verse 13-14, “By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. We have seen and testify that the Father sent His Son to be the Savior of the world.” What is God’s love like? God did not just love His friends or those people who are just around His side. It is not that God so loved those who worship Him that He gave His only Son. John 3:16 says that God so loved the world, the universe, the cosmos, which includes His enemies, that He gave up His only Son. This is Divine love – God’s perfect love. This is why Jesus says, “You also have that. In that, you are perfected.”

Jesus was speaking to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. The world can’t receive this gospel, so when people read it, they say, “Is Jesus serious?”

Verse 15 - 16, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God and God abides in Him.” Where can we find this love? God’s love is abiding in us according to the Scriptures.

Verse 17, “By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.” God is perfect, so are we. Verse 18, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves

punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.” Being perfected in love means we are not afraid to forgive. Many times, the reason we cannot forgive is because we are afraid because the person keeps doing things over and over again. John says that if we are acting this way, we are not perfected in love. Jesus’ command is: be perfect. Be perfect in Divine love, a love that forgives everything. Love does not take an account of a wrong doings. Forgive and let it go. Divine love is that which extends to everybody, even our enemies.

After fifteen verses, in Matthew 6:15, Jesus teaches about The Lord’s Prayer, which says, “If you forgive other’s sins, God will forgive you. If you don’t forgive the sins of others against you, God won’t forgive you.” It is all tied together in that perfect love. It is a love that goes beyond our hurts, those things which have offended us or those things that has caused us sorrow. The Bible says, “Forgive.” Even if we think a person is our enemy, we say, “No, you are my brother.”

It may seem impossible, but it really takes a new birth. When Jesus was on the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was talking to His disciples saying, “Truly, you must be born again.” It takes a new birth in us to make things happen.

Last Sunday, Fr. Roberto in his homily was talking about one such example of this kind of love which forgives all wrongs, that which goes beyond our hurts, and brings God’s divine love in a situation. He shared about a story of a certain city that had a spring of bitter water as seen in 2Kings 2, and nobody can live there because there was no good water supply. The people there came to Elisha and asked him, “What do we do? The city is a great place with everything in it, but the supply of water.” Elisha brought some salt and healed the water.

Fr. Roberto was sharing this to show the nature of salt, that is, salt makes things better, and this is why Jesus called us the salt of the earth. Listening to his sharing for four times, it stirred something in me that there was something else in this story, another message for us in the Cathedral today in relation to the gospel on how we are to walk in perfect love. When we are being mistreated even by our enemies, forget it, drop it. Respond with kindness.

The story was about the city of Jericho. It was a very wicked and evil city. In fact, when the children of Israel came out of Egypt after forty years of wandering, the first thing in their ‘to do list’ is to destroy Jericho. God told Joshua to get rid of Jericho and said, “Don’t just knock down the walls. Don’t just defeat the people, but destroy everything because its wickedness has come up to Me so strongly that it has to go.” Joshua and his people came and destroyed Jericho. The walls came down, sinking down deep into the earth.

When the city was destroyed, Joshua puts the curse on the city and said, “Cursed before the Lord is the man who rises up and builds this city Jericho; with the loss of his first-born he shall lay its foundation, and with the loss of his youngest son he shall set up its gates.” (Joshua 6: 26) This was a strong curse because if the city was going to be rebuilt, it will cost two of a father’s sons. Who would do this just to rebuild a city? Jericho was getting a bad reputation – a very wicked and evil place – and Joshua, one of the founding fathers of Israel, cursed it.

Something worse was about to happen because during the battle, one of the Israelites named Achan saw among the spoils of Jericho a handsome garment, some silver, and a bar of gold, and stole these things and hid them away in his tent. He thought he got away with it. Then, the next battle that Israel fought was against a much smaller city, a much weaker city whose walls were not so powerful, and yet they lost. They also lost 36 of their soldiers. They never had casualties before in battle until that city called Ai and they sought the Lord. They found out that it was because of Achan who did not obey the command of God about the city of Jericho. His disobedience caused Israel losing the battle and the death of 36 soldiers. Again, there was a stigma against Jericho.

A few centuries later, things got very bad in Israel. A man named Hiel, who lived in Bethel, which was ten miles away from Jericho thought, “This is a nice place. I think this will make a great city.” He was told, “Don’t you know the curse says that if you try to rebuild that city, you will lose two of your sons?” Hiel said, “Who cares about the curse? I will just rebuild it and see what happens.” Hiel tried to rebuild Jericho and as soon as he laid its foundations, his oldest son died. He said, “That is a coincidence. I will build and finish the city and put its gates in place.” And his youngest son dropped dead. He continued to rebuild the city, saying that the city had cost the life of his two sons, and called the people to the city, but they did not go. The people said, “The water is bad.” He didn’t know that the water being bitter meant that there was the curse. Again, there was a stigma attached to Jericho. It had a curse, water that was bad, many people that had died, and tragedies that happened - all many bad memories attached to the city.

After twenty years, the sons of the prophets approached Elisha and asked him for grace to heal the waters of the place so that they could use the place again. Elisha did not say, “Didn’t you hear? A national hero called Joshua cursed it. No, it is cursed forever.” Elisha probably knew about the curse, but he also knew about the grace and the mercy of God. He knew about the love of God, the grace of God. He said, “It has been five hundred years since that curse. I think the curse had served its purpose. I am sure Joshua had a reason for putting it in, so maybe it is time to lift up that curse. It is still part of God’s kingdom. I will help you. I’ve got a plan. I am going to take salt and salt is going to be the instrument for healing the strains in Jericho. But before we put salt in there, we have to do something else first.” He told the sons of the prophets, “Bring me a new jar.”

What has the new jar had to do with lifting the curse on Jericho? The jar back in Joshua days was made of clay. Sometimes, the Bible calls them earthen vessels and sometimes jars of clay. They are not like the glass jars we are used to. Glass jars do not absorb any other odor or any taste. The problem with the earthenware vessel or jar of clay, though not easily broken, is that it absorbs the flavor, the smell and the taste of what you put inside. When what you put inside is gone and you put something else in it, the flavor that is in the jar goes into the new flavor. For example, if you store an ampalaya salad in the jar of clay, when it is gone and you fill it with mango salad, after a short time, the mango salad will have a bitter taste because the bitter taste of the ampalaya salad was absorbed into the jar.

Elisha was saying it symbolically, “If you really want Jericho to be healed, it is not a matter of putting salt, but you need a new jar without the bitterness, without the grudges, without the preconceived idea that nothing good comes out of Jericho because it is a place of misery, death, hatred and evil. These had tainted the jars of your hearts and the curse needs to be broken. The old jar has to be done away with. To fix the waters of Jericho, bring me a new jar. Start afresh; a clean slate. No more grudges. You need to leave everything behind. Let us move on and have healing. You need to be forgiving, and the only way you could have healing is to bring a new jar and put salt in it. You can’t have those old attitudes, those old prejudices, and those bitter memories of Jericho. Start with a clean jar, a clean heart so that the salt remains pure and the jar won’t absorb the bitterness, the anger and there will be healing.”

What does this have to do with us today? There are a lot of Jerichos in our lives. There are a lot of people, places, events, groups and all sorts of things that has caused us hurt and pain. When we think about it, it is associated with bitterness, misery, and in some case, these people, places, things and events have hurt us and it has tainted our jars. It has left a taste in our jars, and because of this, it is difficult for us to do what Jesus said – to love and to forgive the enemy.

Going to the Gospel today, the Lord says, “Be a person of forgiveness. Be a person that even if your enemies hurt you, forgive them and restore them.” This is hard to do when bitterness, anger, revenge and judgmentalism are there. As long as these are tainting the jars of our hearts, no healing can even come forth, and we can never truly forgive as what Jesus tells us to do. It can’t be done if we are carrying an old jar that is tainted with so many memories, so much bitterness, and with so many grudges. As long as our jar of hearts is in this condition, we can’t bring about anything good.

Jesus, just as Elijah did, says, “Bring me a new jar without bitterness, without anger, without the judgment and the revenge.” Jesus says to let perfect love wash, cleanse. Make us a new jar and a new heart, then, that divine love that is poured into our hearts won’t be tainted. It won’t be polluted and it will make a difference. It won’t affect the ministry that we want to perform.

2Corinthians 4:6 says that the image of Christ has been put in us; the face of Christ. 1John it says the love of God is in us and verse 7 says that we are jars of clay - the treasure of God, Christ's image, Christ's presence, Christ's love in us. Just like the earthen vessels will absorb something bitter that is inside, it will also absorb something sweet – the sweet, sweet love of Jesus. This love of Jesus put into our earthen vessels will absorb all of that, and then, we take on the image of Christ. We take all that image of His perfect love, and His love within us sits within us and uses us and makes us literally Kingdom people who are a people of love, of divine perfection walking by His love. His love is put in us as earthen vessels, and it must be new and clean. Then, the restoration will happen.

Cathedral of the King, there are a lot of Jerichos right outside our walls and maybe inside these walls. The curse can be lifted. The waters can be healed. You can be made sweet, but first, you have to present before the Lord new jars. Let go of the old jars. You won't be a new jar if you keep hanging on the old jar. Elisha did not ask for an old jar. The old jar has to be scratched. You do not want the effects of Jericho - the curse, the disenfranchisement, that which has been bitter, that which is hopeless. You need to get rid of your old jars and provide new jars so that God can fill it up and infused it with His love so that you can spread this love inside and outside – everywhere.

God is bringing each one of us to a place where we can say, "Lord, this is my heart, the old tainted place of old, but I will create in me a clean heart, a pure heart, a new jar for You to receive Your love and to share it with its pure, unadulterated form for those who need it, and watch the bitter to become sweet." Open ourselves to the Divine love of God with a new jar so that we can minister healing to wherever and whenever God commands us to do, Amen!

Bishop Ariel:

"This is the word of the Lord, and this is the way it is in the kingdom of our God."