

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13 (p. 932)

AUGUST 16, 2020

MATTHEW 15:1-20 (p. 796)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, help us to See with our Eyes, to Hear with our Ears, and to Understand with our Hearts. Fill us so full of your Holy Spirit that we cannot help but feel your Presence and know your Will. Then quicken our spirits, so that we might share what we learn here today with those we encounter in the days ahead. In Jesus' Name we ask this, Amen.

“FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE”

“Why do your disciples break the Executive Orders, and not wash their hands for at least twenty seconds during this Coronavirus”? I think one of the primary intentions of Scripture is help us see ourselves in light of God's Kingdom. And then, make adjustments accordingly. So, if you don't see yourself when you open the Word of God, maybe you need to look again.

It was right smack dab in the middle of the Coronavirus. And some of the more “religious-minded” of the County came up with an idea. Why not hold a series of outside Worship services together? I mean, some Churches weren't doing Worship anyway. Whereas others were meeting, but social distancing and wearing masks and such. Still others were only recording their services, and either uploading them to the Internet, or sending them out over the radio. So, why not Worship the Lord together, instead? Not really Tent Meetings, per se, or Revivals even. But more like an open-air Crusade!

The Methodists, from the great big church downtown quickly agreed. As did the Evangelicals from the Apostolic Church of Spiritual Gifts, way out in the sticks. The Catholics were on-board, as were the Episcopalians, and two separate branches of the Lutheran Church. The Baptists and Wesleyans attended, right alongside of the Congregationalists and members of the Church of Christ. Folks from the Assemblies of God were praising the Lord along with folks from the Christian Reformed. There were Quakers present too, and a few Brethren. They were praying with Presbyterians and Evangelical Free. There was even a dashing young Disciple of Christ Pastor at the pulpit, with a beautiful “smiley mask” in hand! Maybe you can picture it?

What an amazing time it was! People packed the grandstands at the local High School Football Field! Hundreds and hundreds of folks, all wearing masks of course, and social distancing, shared together in Worship! The weather was great! The music was fantastic! Every single Speaker seemed anointed by God! The Fellowship was simply amazing too! And the love, abundant and obvious, overflowed to each and all! Everyone there could sense the power of the Holy Spirit!

People came from all kinds of different backgrounds, just to Worship side-by-side, to share some sound Biblical teaching, and to participate in Heart-felt Praise! There was no agenda, other than Jesus! No Offering even! Just different parts of the Body of Christ coming together as One! Protestants, and Catholics, and Orthodox! Traditional and Contemporary! Conservative and Liberal! Mainline and Evangelical! All Worshiping together in the Name of Jesus! And things have gone quite well! Right up until now!

An entire entourage of cars just pulled through the gates, some with Denominational Logos on the side! Each one packed with Bishops and Cardinals, Regional Ministers and District Superintendents and such! And right behind them, in pickup trucks and mini vans, with hastily painted signs, is a rather angry-looking mob of Elders and Deacons! And they are all wearing scowls, as opposed to masks! It looks like an invasion really! There is not a single smile in the entire bunch!

These are the Keepers of the Faith, Scholars and Teachers of the Law! Each one holds a Position of Authority in the Church! Each one is anything but happy though, over what's taking place out on the field! They have issues, serious issues, questions and reservations! It's not about the "why" of what's happening, not really! It's rather about the "how"! This so-called Service of Worship is not what they are used too, not what they were raised with! And they feel compelled to "correct" what everyone else is doing! Can you imagine something like that?

I have to tell you I have never seen as much division in the world as I see today! It seems to be everywhere! Even here in the United States of America, the greatest nation history has ever seen, people seem to see things in polar opposite ways! And there is no middle ground! It is either "rioting or a peaceful protest", "saving the planet or ruining the economy", "moving forward or preserving values", "making necessary changes or changing what is necessary"! There are even division in the Church of Jesus Christ! There has been for centuries! I'm sure you've noticed!

“We all possess knowledge”, says Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8, just a couple of chapters prior to today’s reading. And folks these days are sure convinced that they do! “But knowledge puffs up,” Paul continues, “whereas love builds up”. He then goes on to talk about doing things, or not doing things, that might cause others to stumble in their Faith. Can you imagine, what that might mean?

Jesus has done some incredible teaching prior to today’s lesson, as well as performed more-than-amazing miracles! There was the Sermon on the Mount, remember, and the Feeding the Five Thousand! He then Walked on the Water! The believers, along with the curious crowds, are truly beginning to sense God’s Presence! When suddenly, the Pharisees, the Gatekeepers of the Faith, show up and start questioning the “whys” and the “wherefores”! “Hey,” they say, “this is different”, “very different”, different from what we were taught, not like what we are used to all! Maybe even contrary to the Letter of the Law? Can you see it?

It would be like coming to Church and being asked to sanitize your hands and put on a mask, avoid the drinking fountains, and skip Fellowship Time all together! It would be similar to having seats roped off, and set six feet apart! Or doing Communion with those little cup things! Can you imagine how different that would feel? How wrong? It would be like coming to Church in previous years on Vacation Bible School Sunday and discovering a great big multi-colored “wall”, stretched across the entire front of the Sanctuary, covering the Communion Table and the Cross!

It might be like “Drive Thru Communion”, or listening to “Church” in the parking lot—on either loudspeakers, or your car radio! It could be like watching Worship on your laptop at home, or your phone! Maybe even days later! Only today there is a huge tent set up out back for Worship, with folding tables and chairs, and a Dixieland Band! And right in the middle of a rousing chorus of “When the Saints Go Marching In”, an Elder from the “Antioch Church of Perpetual Guilt” bursts in and starts screaming above the Praise Team!

He then looks at the Pastor in the Pulpit and says, “Why are you having Church on a Thursday? Don’t you know that Saturday is the Sabbath? Well, actually, it’s Friday at sundown until Saturday at sundown, but it’s not today! And Christian Tradition has always celebrated the Resurrection of the Lord on Sunday, the first day of the week? What on earth has possessed you to be here now?”

Then a Deacon from the “United Church of Total Control” chimes in; “Why are the youth using fish crackers and Pepsi for Communion? Don’t you know the Lord broke bread, plain bread, Pita or Matzah bread most likely, and shared a cup of wine? This just isn’t right!” Then, someone with a fancy Collar and an extravagant-looking Robe jumps into the fray! “We don’t anoint people with oil at our church, at least not without proper instruction!” “Guitars are not mentioned anywhere in the Bible!” “And if you are going to speak in Tongues, then by golly we’ll tell you when to do it, and where, and exactly what to say!” “How can you people call this Worshipping the Lord”?

The Religious Elite have arrived on the scene! They've come all the way from the Capital too, and want to know why Jesus and His Disciples are breaking with Tradition! "Your people don't ritually wash their hands before they eat!" They have other issues of course, like what they eat, and when. But this washing thing, this obvious break with Traditional Levitical Laws, clearly makes their point! "You are not doing "Church" in the right way! You are not practicing "True Religion", as prescribed, by Law! And I get the concern! I really do! But they are "Practicing their Faith", aren't they? And they are doing it with Jesus present! So, what's the problem?

It seems a bit absurd to me. How could anyone, Church Leader or otherwise, get so upset over something as trivial as that? How could we, with whatever "Ecclesiastical Pet Peeve" we might have? I mean, it's still church, isn't it? Whether we are tracking who is at Worship or dismissing folks afterwards to the parking lot? Whether we skip sharing coffee and donuts, or not have Choir for another month or so? We are still Worshipping Almighty God, right? And doing it with Jesus in our midst! Shouldn't everyone just turn their hearts towards Heaven? Shouldn't the "hows", and even the "whys", be completely secondary to that?

Be honest, would meeting on a Football Field seem wrong to you? How about sprinkling verses immersion for Baptism? What about weekly Communion verses monthly or quarterly—dunking the bread versus passing the trays? How about those pre-packaged Communion Sets in front of you? How do you feel when a Preacher stands behind the pulpit when they speak, versus walking about the Dias, or even down the aisle?

Can you see yourself anywhere in the text? How about in light of the Kingdom of God? Do you sense the Holy Spirit even now, nudging you to make any attitude adjustments?

“We all have knowledge!” And believe me, we all have opinions! Heart-felt beliefs, too, especially when it comes to the Propriety of Worship! We all have a definite understanding of what it means to be “Church”, even in “such a time as this”! And when these “Foundations” are shaken, or heaven forbid, changed, believe me, most of us start to get a little edgy! I know I do! And some of us, even start to scream!

I mean, there are Boundaries, right, Religious Boundaries! Or at least there should be! “Right” and “Wrong” are right and wrong, right? But here is the thing: to those who look on from the outside, those who Jesus is calling us to share the Good News with, those longing for hope in the midst of hopelessness, to them, all of the controversy just seems absurd!

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

The young Church in Corinth, like many Churches throughout history, was experiencing differing opinions! People were actually mad at one another! Can you believe it?

There were people who disagreed over “how” things should be done! As well as “how” Christians should treat one another! They were even some suing each other in Court! Imagine!

So, Paul wrote them a letter, one with all kinds of suggestions in it, on all kinds of subjects! But his primary purpose in the entire thing was singular! You might want to read it sometime! You’ll discover a definite theme! Christians need to get along! They need to settle disputes and heal divisions so that they can Witness to the world! You see, if Christians can’t get along with each other, then how are they any different from those outside the Church? How we act with each other, and especially how we act out in the world, really matters! We need to be the “Oil” that God pours out on “Troubled Waters”! And the waves are really raging right now! “If I speak in the tongues of men, and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal!”

Don’t get me wrong! I am not saying that ideas and opinions, or even Traditions are bad! By-the-way, that’s not what Jesus is saying either! Tradition is a powerful way to connect us with those who have blazed the trail before us, with our Forefathers and Foremothers in the Faith Community! It’s Tradition that helps us transcend the barriers of time, sharing in Worship with those who mentored us in the Faith! Traditions are actually good! However, when we are doing the things that we do, simply because that is the way in which we have always done them, then we are missing the point! And when Tradition becomes Traditionalism, we lose!

I'm sure you remember the story of Francis. She used to pray and read Scripture for several hours every day. But whenever she tried to have her quiet time, her cat would rub up against her and distract her. Eventually, she had to put a collar on her cat, and tie it to the bedpost so that she could have her quiet time with the Lord. Years later, when her son was grown, he too wanted to have the deep Spiritual Life that he saw in his mother. But the pace of his world was very hectic. So, he limited his Prayer Time to an hour a day, and only studied Scripture once in a while. But he too, in an effort to concentrate, would tie his cat to the bedpost. Years later, his daughter grew up in an even faster-paced world. In fact, because of time constraints, she skipped Bible Study and Prayer Time all together! But in order to keep the Family Faith, each morning, while she showered, she dutifully tied the cat to the bedpost!

Tradition has been described as the "Living Faith of the Dead". It allows those who have passed on before us to continue to teach us. But Traditionalism is the "Dead Faith of the Living"! It is a matter of obeying the rules and the laws, following the things which we have always done, in exactly the ways in which we have always done them, simply because "that's the way we do it around here"! Traditionalism leads us down a path to the seven last words of a dying church, which are "We've never done it that way before."

Traditionalism is going through the motions of being church, which indeed misses the point! Any time we turn our attention away from Christ, and onto the Church instead, or the Denomination, or ourselves, we change Christianity into "Churchianity." And Jesus warns us Pharisees to watch out for that!

So, maybe stop and ask yourself a question, because I am doing the same thing right now. Ask, on a scale of 1-10, “how am I doing as a Christian?” “How are we doing as the Church?” “How are all the various and sundry Denominations, and Non-Denominations doing in the world right now, because the world needs a lot of help!” “How can I, and how can we do even better?” But use this Scale as your guide: “Love is patient and kind. It does not envy or boast, and it is not proud. Love is not rude or self-seeking. It keeps no record of wrongs. Love is not easily angered. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.”

Jesus unloads on the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. And with good reason! He quotes Isaiah, and accuses them of honoring God with their lips, but actually having their hearts far from the Lord. He tells them that their Worship is in vain, and that their Teachings are but rules taught by men. Instead of Worshipping God in Spirit and in Truth, He says, these Pillars of the Faith have led the people into Worshipping “According to the Rules.”

Our Lord then uses the examples of unclean hands, and unclean food, and even an “unclean” lady, in order to make His case! What matters, says the Lord, is not following the rules, but rather following the nudging of the Spirit in your heart! It is not unclean food that makes you impure, according to Jesus, but rather an unclean attitude and an unclean heart! And it is not being part of the right “Family of Faith” that allows one to eat at the Master’s table, but rather, being a “Person of Faith”!

Jesus moves out of the routine, out to the border, the edge, out into the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon! And there, a Canaanite Woman, a non-Jewish woman, does an amazing thing! She recognizes Jesus for who He is! She confesses Him with highly Honorific Titles; “Lord,” and “Son of David”. And Jesus, the Son of God, even though He is focused on His mission to Israel, the Chosen People of God, appears to be won over! What does that say? Can you see yourself now? Jesus is confronted with relentless Faith, with an honest and sincere Faith, with a Tenacious Faith, one worth writing about! And our Lord responds to that Faith! At a minimum, that should make us stop and think!

By “Tradition, this lady was an “outsider”, in multiple ways—a Canaanite, a woman, a woman whose daughter was demon-possessed! And yet, when she knelt before Jesus and cried for Mercy, that’s what she received! What a witness to those who looked on, including the Disciples, those already inside the Church! Jesus responds to Faith with an outpouring of Love! There is Hope in that, isn’t there? And now these three remain; Faith, Hope and Love. But the greatest of these is Love! And all of God’s people said, Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious and Almighty God, we have gathered once again in your Holy Name. We come together as you have created us to be, a Fellowship of Faith, and Hope, and Love. And the greatest of these is Love! We have assembled as a Community, Lord, One Body, a powerful force for your Glory. And for this privilege, and for your Grace in the midst of it, we give you thanks! Father, we have just traveled through the week that you have given to us. And we are preparing to step into yet another. Please give us the strength to run when we must, the peace to rest when we may, and your mighty, outstretched arm to help rise once again when we stumble. Enable us to Finish this Race Lord, and to glorify you with each step we take.

Father, we do sometimes find ourselves lonely on our journey. And we do, sometimes, find ourselves a bit lost. Please take our hands at these moments, and help us to feel your strength and support. Steady us, Lord, and point us again in the direction that we should go. Make us signposts too, if you will, so that others will know the way to you. Use us Lord, your Church, as powerful and mighty workers in your Kingdom!

As we walk your paths, Father, help us to help one another along the way. Help us to see those who are lost, and to speak a word of direction and encouragement to them. Help us to place them before you in our daily prayers. Grant us the power to pray in Jesus' Name for healing and guidance and peace. Quicken us to lift up the needs of this world too, those of our loved ones, and even those of people we do not know! Make us a People of Prayer, Lord. Today, Father, we lift up before you..... We entrust these precious loved ones into your care, and do it, in the Name of your Son, Jesus Christ. And now, we pray together in the way that He taught us, saying, Our Father...