

12th Week of Pentecost Sermon
August 27/28, 2022

Has the nation changed its gods? Most Americans, at least in survey, claim to be Christian, but fewer and fewer seem to have even a rudimentary understanding of the core of the faith. There has been an increasing attitude of “You worship God your way and I will worship Him my way.” If I want to worship the Lord by going out in nature hunting or fishing, what is that to you?

There are two things about this that should make us wonder. First, it is as if we say that can, at a whim, change what faith is in order to suit our needs. This really gets at the heart of the matter. The second part misses the focus of what Christ is doing, that which can be seen clearly in the history of the church, and that is, making us one, His bride, the body, the gathering, the *ecclesia*. We are social creatures. God made us this way. Social media is anything but social. It is grouping in the name of social without either decorum, or true interaction. Full communication requires personal interaction. One does not go to church, one is either a part of the church, or else they are not.

In the church, understanding it in this way, there is a functional hierarchy for the sake of good order, but really only One who is our Head, our leader. In this too is a twofold understanding, for on the one hand we are in an intimate and personal relationship with the Lord. This is reflected in our personal piety. That is the piety that is carried out when no one but the Lord is observing. Praying, reading Scripture, studying, meditation, and pondering on the Lord’s direction in your personal life. The second part is what Jesus is addressing in today’s Gospel lesson. He is talking about gatherings and our public behavior before others. He was talking about the necessary order of things. There are those appointed to positions of leadership. Yes, sinners like you and me, but with a God appointed function. When you go to the doctor’s office, you want the doctor to see you for your malady and not the receptionist. So also, God raises up in His authority who lead the church. Contrast these things with a world that not only tells us we can do our own thing, but that anyone who wants can do whatever they wish. Twenty-five dollars and some paperwork and you too can be ordained. So much nonsense in the world. Want a \$25 medical license doctor?

To be sure, both personal piety and social association should be concurrent. We need and should have a private piety, but also, we are a part of the gathering which we proclaim every time we say that we believe in the communion of saints. The church has long struggled with this, going one direction or the other, when, in fact, Jesus makes clear in His teaching that it is both.

Look at how Jesus points out the obvious for us all. As small children, we learn quickly how to get the attention we want. Some very introverted people do this by intentionally deflecting the attention they do not want. Both are the same. We think our selves important. Yes, we are loved by the Lord. Everyone is precious in the Lord’s eyes and those for whom He willingly died. But, equality with God is not something to be grasped and so Jesus proclaims that the humble are blessed. The meek or humble are the ones who inherit God’s riches gained at Christ’s expense.

We should not act, or at least try to not place our selves in positions of hierarchy. You are you and I am who I am. We each have been wonderfully created by our Lord and He calls for us to live in harmony with Him and one another. He calls for us to be humble and not seek to have the best positions, places of honor, or to be first. This is in direct contrast with our world which is constantly encouraging us to be out front. You deserve it, after all. No, no, I do not

deserve it. The higher the position of authority in God's kingdom, there more you serve others. It is not a matter of getting ahead, but getting closer to the spirit of Christ. The more the spirit of Christ is in you, the less you think about things in this way.

Behind the facade of pride is the reality that we do not actually think we need to be saved. We do, but if we allow ourselves to enter into the temptation of thinking that we do not need to be fully saved, we deny our Lord. That is the very core of our faith at stake. One need not be paranoid about this, for we each have wanted others to notice us. But also, it is in the journey toward humility that we begin to find the real freedom our Lord has in mind.

There are only two kinds of people in this world. There are those who know the Lord and those who need to know the Lord. Sadly, we know there are those who will never come to know the Lord, but that is not our business. We just know there are some. But we are called to welcome all strangers not knowing whether or not the one whom we invite in is a sister or brother in the faith.

If we think about this, we can understand that this is exactly how we were welcomed into the fellowship. Sure, some of may have been very young, but the principle of hospitality is the same. We were encouraged by those who brought us into fellowship and helped to nurture our faith. If you have been so blessed, you can think of some of the mentors the Lord sent your way. They corrected you and, when appropriate and necessary, chastised you. It is the way the world has worked, for it is the way of the Lord and the way of walking in the salvation which is yours.

We know that we live in a time that is becoming increasingly hostile to true faith. People do want things to be the way they want them, but we also have enough maturity to know that this is not the way of things. Sadly, many seem to capitulate to the pressure of the culture. This is why the Lord has sent prophets so that those who were willing would hold fast to the truth of faith which was given them. So also, we are to hold fast to the faith which has been given us.

What we are now experiencing in our culture did not happen overnight. Forty years ago, when I entered seminary, I saw the signs of the things to come. It was not good. Along the way, the liars said, "No, that is not what we are after, that won't happen." It did happen and anyone paying attention knew that opening up to say that sin is normal would come with a cost. Our Lord is no fool and when He gave the commandments, they are a reflection of His goodness. When we call what the Lord has called bad, good, we begin what can only end in an imprisonment because of sin. So many do seem to have taken this path and we see the result. Somehow punishing the wrong doer is evil and the one who sees the sin for what it is, is hateful. Isaiah spoke to this clearly when God gives a woe to those who call evil good and good evil. We may be experiencing things like this in our world, but now is the time to hold fast to your faith and be insistent upon doing things as you have been taught to do them by the faithful.

Hear the word of the Lord. A nation that has forsaken the Lord has forsaken the very One who has allowed them to be a nation. So, what are we do? Should we join those who have cast off constraints? It seems that many have. No! Our Lord has told us these things so that we could hold fast to the truth of the Gospel which has been revealed to us through Christ our Savior. Jesus knew He was headed for the cross and He went there to accomplish the Father's will. Unlike Him, we may not know how the end will play out, but we do have the opportunity to join with Christ here and now and hold fast to the truth which has been given us through Him.

The world takes, but the Lord gives. Do not seek position or status in this world, but seek the will of the One who has and will save you. He has promised to lead the faithful into all righteousness for His name's sake. Thanks be to God! Amen.