

St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church

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“No Striving - No Rising (To Eternal Life)”

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Lent 2-C

Saturday / Sunday, February 20-21, 2016

Let us pray...

O God, our Father, take these feeble words of mine and make them yours. Fill the gaps of my inadequacy. For give my pride and error, and grant that whatever is said in honesty and truth may be used for the upholding of your people and to the glory of your holy Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen...

Two weeks ago, our grandson, Jon, skied for the Special Olympics at The Swain Ski resort south of Rochester near Dansville. It was a gorgeous day for skiing: a sunny, bright blue cloudless sky; temperatures were in the low 30's. Jon skied very well. It is thought by his coach that he set a record for the day on one of his slalom runs, completing the run in 27 seconds. And he skis with no poles! It was a good day for him, coming home with a Gold and Silver medal.

It is such times as what was experienced at Swain that Sunday morning that brings back memories of earlier times, times of trial, mishaps, rising up to continue his goal to remain standing on his skis. Jon has striven to climb many mountains in his young life. He has taught us much about perseverance, striving for the upward goal.

To a lesser or greater degree, Jon's story is our story, yours as well as mine. We, you and I, are able to look back into our own lives to times of trial, times of great challenges, which called upon us to persevere, to strive for whatever goal was set.

In reading today's account taken from Paul's epistle to the Philippians, two lines caught my attention. Verses 18 and 19 read, **For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.**

In the previous verse, verse 17, Paul directed followers of Christ to be imitators of him, not that he is perfect, but that he strives to become less imperfect. Paul requests Philippians to observe the behavior of others; to compare their walk in life with his. As he observes the behaviors of so many around him, Paul is saddened deeply by what he sees. Paul is deeply moved to tears. He describes the behaviors he observes as being enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end, whose eternal destiny is destruction, eternal death. Paul observes a mentality of pride and materialism; whose god is their appetite.

To the word *appetite*, many definitions can be applied, all of which are related to the sin of pride. In the original Greek, for *appetite*, we would read that their god is their belly; their god is in their inner most parts of their being. Which reminds me of a verse from Matthew the Rector used this past week, (See, I do pay attention!) “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:21)

Where is one’s treasure in today’s culture? Is it in Christ? Or is treasure only to be found in the world. It is a given that materialism, the desire for more, is rampant in today’s culture. Just think back to “Black Friday” and the intense and often cruel materialistic behaviors observed. So many always want more, and more.

When I was in my late teens and early twenties, to earn money for college, I worked for a then nationally well-known department store, and one thing I came away with from that experience is that money, and only money ruled. Our daughter, Karen, also worked for a well-known department store, as head of a relatively large department. She was good at her job. She not only met but exceeded the quota set for her department. Her reward? She was expected to do 10% more in the following year. Money, and only money rules.

I believe that Paul is sharing with us this morning that such attitudes, such idolization of money or the idolization materialistic things become enemies of the cross in Christ Jesus. To hold onto such attitudes and behaviors result in banishment from the kingdom of God. By the way, the stores that employed Karen and me are now closed.

Because of a certain personality involved in this year’s run for the office of President of the United States, I wondered about how much wealth is in these United States. I was amazed to learn that as of 2013, there are 9 million, 630 thousand millionaires in this country alone! Of those, 536 are billionaires. I wonder if they tithe....

Sadly, for all too many, such individuals are the epitome of success, worldly success. It is such individuals that we see pictured on the front pages of many magazines as “Person of the Year.” The culture idolizes them in various ways.

Paul writes his letter to the Colossians, chapter 3, verse 2: **Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.** In this materialistically oriented society of ours, to do as Paul states is difficult indeed. Today, and I believe more than ever, materialism has never been stronger. For many, it seems to be their life's only goal – to get more.

I came across an interesting statement I am led to share with you. “A worshipper can never rise above that which is worshipped.” This statement is so true, and bears repeating. “A worshipper can never rise above that which is worshipped.” A person can never rise above what he idolizes or worships. If one is able to rise above that which is worshipped or idolized, such as wealth, cars, Hollywood or sports heroes, whatever, then the person becomes the greater. To say it in another way, we cannot and do not worship or idolize that which is equal to us or below us. What we worship needs always to be above us. If that which we idolize is of the earth, then it follows that we can never rise above earthly things. And if we cannot rise above earthly things, how then can we be in Christ Jesus. We can't. Instead, we sink deeper into our sin.

What Paul writes then is so true. We are to set our minds on things that are above, where the true joys are to be found. And how are we to do this? We are to strive and stand firm in the faith.

Ever try to strive and stand firm for anything? It takes work and much effort. It takes determination and conviction to overcome the challenges the goal presents! And this was an area that was another sore spot for Paul, or for that matter, a problem for any priest or bishop of the Christian Church. Apparently there were many in Paul's time who joined the church in body only, for their heart remained unchanged. Oh, these people believed alright, but only in the theoretical, the philosophical aspects of the faith. When it came time to stand firm for the faith, time to show one's true colors, the cross of Jesus was denied and turned away from.

The words Jesus spoke as recorded in Luke's Gospel now ring out oh so clearly. Jesus stated that we are to strive to enter by the narrow door, for many will seek to enter the kingdom and will not be able to.

One of the key words Jesus used is “strive.” We are to strive, to make the sacrifice, to go through the struggle of entering the narrow way into Christ's kingdom. The reward is well worth the effort.

The Jews of Christ's day thought that because they were God's chosen people and had privileges other nations did not, that they would automatically be accepted before God. Christ had news for them that this would not be so. Thus their anger against him.

This same thinking, this same mind set is present today. There are those who believe that regular attendance in church is an automatic ticket into Christ's kingdom. “Not so”, said Jesus. No one can be a follower of Jesus without expending effort. We cannot drift our way into the

kingdom. There is a decision to make: to choose one or another. Joshua faced the same decision. He chose life. And so, too, are we. To be granted eternal life, there are sins to repent of; there are habits and other behaviors to be renounced; pride is to be humbled.

For many, the righteous choice is most difficult. You see, there is but one right way. Conversely, there are an infinite number of wrong ways. It is quite easy to become part of an apparent winning worldly cause. The reason is quite simple. The worldly cause needs no spiritual preparation.

The Pharisees sacrificed bodily comfort by standing in prayer for long hours on busy street corners so as to build up reputation for piety – all for the sake of pride. A follower of Jesus, on the other hand, is to forgo pride itself, to pray in secret, to work humbly for the kingdom, all for the sake of Christ.

There are not many who will pay the price of surrendering pride and develop a discipline of prayer. It is strange, indeed, that we are willing to pay high prices for totally artificial joys which only leads to destruction, all the while, refusing the discipline of prayer, fasting and almsgiving – all of which brings true joys, true life. Jesus and Paul weep, for those who find this true joy are relatively few in number.

It is a given life on this planet is not easy. It is very difficult. Striving to enter through the narrow door of Christ's kingdom is not an easy task either. Do we think it was easy for Jesus? All we need to do is to recall the many nights he spent alone in prayer. Last Sunday, we heard read from the Gospel how Jesus wrestled with and overcame the devil's many temptations. And how many times have we heard read about His many debates and arguments with the Pharisees? And of course, the ultimate in striving to enter the narrow door - Christ dying on the cross for you and for me.

If Jesus' strength was taxed to its utmost, why would life be any easier of us? Are we any better than our Savior? Of course not! We are all aware of the age-old proverb, "No pain; no gain." This proverb also is applicable to our walk with Christ. To overcome the challenges this world presents in our walk to achieve eternal life requires concentrated effort, even to emotional, physical pain.

Sin is easy and quite natural. Righteousness, on the other hand, is difficult because it goes against our human nature. And what really bothers us is that there is no middle of the road choice! We cannot have a little Christian bit of this or a little Christian bit of that. That would make life nice and things would be much easier, wouldn't they? However, when it comes to following Christ, there are no gray areas. We either choose to strive to be in Christ or choose to be without Him. We either travel a road to eternal life or a road to hell and eternal death. Traveling on either, the narrow way leading to Christ, or the wide, broad way of destruction, is a matter of choice and determination. Our destiny depends not upon fate or chance, but on choice, our choice, our perseverance, our effort.

Jesus said that we must strive, we must put forth determination and energy to enter into His kingdom. I found a poem which, in a light-hearted way, illustrates quite well Christ's message to us. The poem is titled, "Two Frogs in Cream" by T. C. Hamlet.

"Two frogs fell into a can of cream,
Or so I've heard it told;
The sides of the can were shiny and steep,
The cream was deep and cold.

"O, what is the use?" croaked number 1.
"Tis fate; no help is around.
Goodbye, my friends! Goodbye, sad world!"
And weeping still, he drowned.

But number two, of sterner stuff,
Dog-paddled in surprise,
All the while he swiped his creamy face
And dried his creamy eyes.

"I'll swim a while, at least," he said,
"Or so I've heard it said,
It really wouldn't help the world
If one more frog were dead."

For an hour or two, he kicked and swam,
Not once did he stop to mutter,
But kicked and kicked and swam and kicked,
Then hopped out of ... the butter!"

Moral: We can either take the easy way out which leads to our eternal destruction, or as Christ said, strive and persevere, be determined to seek righteousness with Him, and your reward will be an invitation from Jesus to enter through the narrow door into life eternal with Him.

Now to God who forever is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.