

The Rev. Christine Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 1, 2017
Philippians 2:1-13

"Therefore, my beloved... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you to will and to work for his good pleasure."¹ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the catholic tradition, from the early church through to the Anglican and Episcopal churches today, you will find the Collect for Purity. It was originally prayed privately by the priests in their preparation for celebrating the Holy Eucharist, or Holy Communion. But it was a prayer too good to be kept in the sacristy, and it became part of our common worship in Anglican tradition. We now pray this collect as a corporate prayer at the beginning of the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

A collect is a short general prayer used in Christian liturgy, or worship, that teaches us about God and our relationship to God. "Collect" is a funny term in our contemporary use of language, but a collect is a gathering prayer, used for the gathering, or collecting, the theological focus and intention for worship on a particular day in the liturgical calendar, such as the Collect of the Day. Collects are also used for the gathering of the people to prepare for worship, such as the Collect for Purity.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord.

The Collect for Purity beautifully sets the context for our conscious communion with God, and invites us into prayer. There are three primary movements to this prayer. In the first movement, "*To you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid,*" we acknowledge that we are known. Our hearts and desires and secrets are open and visible to God. We come as we are, without pretense. In the second movement, "*Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,*" we ask the Holy Spirit to cleanse and inspire us in preparation of receiving God more fully into our lives. And then in the third, "*That we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name,*" we promise to respond to this gift of God's presence with love and praise to God and to bear God's image in the world, reflecting God's nature in our lives.

This prayer is both a petition to God and a statement of intention. That, by acknowledging who God is, we ask God to form us more fully in his image. In the Book of Genesis, we are told that humanity is made in the image of God. While all of God's creation is beloved, we bear a unique mark upon our very being. Like a seal set into warm wax, God has impressed God's own image deep within us. This means that when we live, love, and act in certain ways, we bear God's very impression and presence in the world. We reflect and magnify God's nature within our lives and among those we encounter.

That we have been created in God's image means we are created to be godlike in a human way, so that through living into the fullness of our humanity, we may reveal God's holiness. One of ways we reveal holiness in our lives is when we give ourselves away in love. All that we have and all that we are is given us by God, who is the giver of all good gifts. We

¹ Philippians 2:12-13; NRSV

bear God's image in the world when we, too, give good gifts. And when our gifts are sourced in love and an assurance of God's eternal presence, our gifts become more than offerings from our harvest they become holy and sacraments in the world.

This morning, we celebrate our first Sunday in our Stewardship season. Yes, everyone's favorite time of the year! Now, usually when clergy start in on stewardship, everyone else begins to stop paying attention and make other plans for the next several Sunday mornings! Please...I ask that you hear me out before you decide that you would rather beat the crowds to brunch for a few weeks rather than come to church. I focus on the Collect for Purity this morning because this year's Stewardship Campaign theme has been drawn directly from it. Joining the Diocese of Virginia, this season we will lift up and meditate upon the words, "*to you all hearts are open.*" Over the next four Sundays, we will reflect on these words, exploring what they might mean in our individual and family lives, as well as in our common life together at Good Shepherd.

The first words of the Collect for Purity remind us where our attention should be. It is to Almighty God that we should turn and open our hearts. Should we live and move and have our being grounded on God, then we are able to live most fully and bear most brightly God's image in the world. Then we may best live, love, and give as God does.

Last Sunday, I preached a bit about the nature of parables – about how they are short stories designed to be surprising and baffling and to shock us into new ways of thinking. Jesus used parables to teach about the nature of God because the full nature of God is, essentially, mystery. God does not reside easily for long within the box we construct in our attempts to contain him.

While God is and remains a mystery, we trust in our experiences of God within the world and within our lives. We also trust in God as revealed in his Son, Jesus. Jesus teaches us what being fully human and bearing God's image in the world looks like. It looks like loving your neighbor as much you love yourself. It looks like caring for those who are unloved and even those who are unlovable. It looks like healing the sick, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, caring for those who are vulnerable, visiting the imprisoned. It looks like giving yourself away in love to all those who ask. Through Jesus' life and ministry, we learn how to be in right relationship with God and each other, and how to reveal God's holiness through our lives.

Today and for the next four Sundays, we will gather our pledges and other offerings, and representatives of our parish leadership and ministries will accompany our gifts to the altar. Then, altogether, we will offer them to God, trusting our mysterious God will consecrate them and give them back to us to be used faithfully and for the building of His kingdom. Our pledges to Good Shepherd, this particular part of the Body of Christ, represent our promises made in response to God's promises to us. This Sunday, as in every Sunday, our ushers will pass the plates during the Offertory. In these plates, we gather not only our treasure, but also our selves, souls, and bodies, offering all that we have and all that we are to the God of all creation, asking that He build us into His beloved community.

Each Sunday this month, we will also hear from members of our parish family. They will share with us how being a part of this parish, this community centered in God, has changed their lives and shaped their spiritual journeys. I invite you to receive their stories in love and as the gifts they are intended to be, for speaking of lived truth is not always easy. I invite you to take some time to reflect upon the ways in which you have experienced God's presence in times of joy as well as sorrow, and how your participation in the life of Good Shepherd has been

meaningful and provided unexpected gifts.

And I also invite you to make a pledge to Good Shepherd this year; a pledge made in faithfulness to God's call to us. I invite you to reveal with your gifts the holiness and grace experienced in your lives. It is important that we commit our faith, no matter how robust or nascent it might be at the moment, to a particular community. No parish in the Church will be perfect, for they are all filled with humans! But this parish is made more perfect by your participation in our community. A pledge is our loving and faithful promise in response to the love and grace shown us by God.

This year let us present our best gifts in gratitude and in full recognition that all our gifts originate from the good gifts that God has already given us. Let us give in affirmation of our experiences of God's presence and work in the world, both in the joy and beauty, as well as in the suffering and ugliness. Let us give ourselves away in love, trusting that, in God, there is always enough. Let us give our gifts knowing that God will make them holy and sacraments in the world.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.