

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Homily for Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd; Burke, Virginia

When Fr. Packard and I met for lunch at my monastery a few days ago, he said that in his own preaching he doesn't follow anything like the classical Presbyterian model of three main topics. As you'd expect, I don't regularly do that either, but I think there are some good reasons to follow that pattern this morning. I know that a number of you have been studying Benedictine spirituality for some months, and it is quite remarkable how some of the points touched upon in today's readings from the Common Lectionary dovetail with central aspects of Benedictine spirituality. I've singled out three: forgiveness, the evil of complaining or murmuring, and living in love after the pattern that Christ has left us.

First then, forgiveness. In our reading from Ephesians we heard the beautiful lines: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you." The crucial importance of forgiveness for a Christian is highlighted by the fact that immediately after Jesus gives us the words of the Lord's Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, he comments on only one of the prayer's seven petitions: the importance of forgiving others if we expect to be forgiven ourselves. St. Benedict takes up this point in chapter 13 of his Rule, where he writes: "The celebration of Lauds and Vespers must never pass by without the superior's reciting the entire Lord's Prayer at the end for all to hear, because thorns of contention are likely to spring up. Thus warned by the pledge they make to one another in the very words of this prayer: *Forgive us as we forgive*, they may cleanse themselves of this kind of vice."

That sounds great, of course, but we should be honest enough to admit that it is often easier said than done, especially if the harm we have suffered from someone else is very painful and if the offender shows no remorse. I once read a poem written by a woman in the form of a dialogue between herself and the man who had raped her when she was only twelve years old. At one point the woman, now an adult, says: "I have my own pain,/ I have a clenched fist where

my heart belongs./ Instead of a heart: a clenched fist.” The woman who wrote those lines and who eventually came to forgive the man who had hurt her so badly was later giving a talk about forgiveness to a group of teachers and students out in the American Southwest. At one point she was interrupted by a teacher in the back of the room who said, “My father molested me. I’m never going to forgive him, and I resent your telling me that I should.” On that occasion, the speaker was so taken aback that she didn’t know quite how to respond, but a perceptive teenager in the front row got up, turned around, and said to the teacher, “She’s not telling you that you *should* forgive. She’s just saying that *if* you do, your heart will open.” That’s really it. No longer a clenched fist or a clenched heart, but hands and a heart that are free.

Some persons might be able to come to that kind of freedom rather quickly, even when the cause of their pain was as terrible as something like the murder of their child, but more frequently forgiveness is a *process*, sometimes a years-long process. A man whose wife had several times been unfaithful to him once wrote that anger at his wife returns again and again, so he finds himself repeatedly called to cultivate compassion—compassion toward the very same person, over the very same offense, repeatedly opening his heart, staying vigilant so that it doesn’t ease shut when he’s not watching. Some persons find that prayer helps them come to forgive repeatedly and persistently, so they deliberately pray each day for the person who has hurt them, asking for blessings for him or her. Others simply imagine good things happening for the offender. Hoping or praying in this way does open our hearts, perhaps even bringing us to the point that we no longer need such prayer because there is no longer any anger in us to serve as a reminder. I repeat that this will not always be easy, but Jesus himself never said that the straight and narrow way was easy. St. Benedict, however, does have in the prologue to his Rule some beautiful words that give us confidence to persevere no matter what the cost. He writes:

We intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.

What Benedict writes there is definitely true of all Christians. When I was a novice, I came across a holy card with a few words written by a rather well-known French author named Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. What he said was this: "Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God." All of us were made for such joy, for what St. Benedict calls "the inexpressible delight of love." Genuinely to forgive is a preeminent way of coming to such joy. That is my first point.

Next, I want to say a bit about one of the most pernicious destroyers of such joy, namely, complaining, grumbling, murmuring. Our Gospel reading began with Jesus telling the people, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." At that his hearers reacted very negatively, complaining about him and about what he had been saying. They considered him no different from themselves, so they asked, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven.'?" The Greek word used for their complaining even sounds bad: *egongudzon*, a nasty-sounding word that could also be translated as "they grumbled" or "they murmured."

It's quite remarkable how frequently St. Benedict warns against this kind of behavior in his Rule. As you probably know or would guess, obedience is one of the vows mentioned specifically in the formula for profession, and in his chapter on this virtue the saint writes: "This obedience will be acceptable to God and agreeable to men only if compliance with what is commanded is not cringing or sluggish or half-hearted, but is free from any grumbling or any reaction of unwillingness." And besides obedience, another key mark of Benedictine life is poverty. This word, of course, means different things to different people, and in some respects it would be better to speak of Benedictine simplicity of life or frugality. In fact, when Benedict literally uses the word "poor" in his Rule, he is usually referring to lay persons in the vicinity of the monastery who could benefit from donations of food or clothing from the monks. The monks themselves do, to be sure, have absolutely no personal possessions, but the monastery is expected to have a high enough standard of living that the monks will normally have no doubt or anxiety about where their next meal is coming from or whether they will continue to have a roof over their heads. Everything is owned communally, with individual members receiving for their use what each one needs and in the proportion appropriate for each.

Here there is obviously an opening for murmuring, which Benedict tries to ward off with some very strong language in the short 34th chapter of the Rule, on the distribution of goods within the monastery. Since monks have always looked back to the first Christian community at Jerusalem as the primary model for their way of life, Benedict understandably begins this chapter with a reference to what St. Luke writes about the Jerusalem community in the fourth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, that "distribution was made to each one as he had need." Benedict comments on this in the following words: "By this we do not imply that there should be favoritism—God forbid—but rather consideration for weaknesses. Whoever needs less should

thank God and not be distressed, but whoever needs more should feel humble because of his weakness, not self-important because of the kindness shown him. In this way, all the members will be at peace. First and foremost, there must be no word or sign of the evil of grumbling, no manifestation of it for any reason at all. If, however, anyone is caught grumbling, let him undergo more severe discipline.”

There are still other references to the evil of murmuring in the Rule, but you get the point. Such behavior tears down instead of building up, leads to gloomy faces and disparaging words. All of us, whether monks, clergy, or laypersons, have to recognize that things will not always go in exactly the way we might prefer, no more than was the case with Jesus himself, who indeed had to put up with much more opposition and inconvenience than any of us can expect to face, but his constant attitude was the one that should mark our lives as well: “yet not my will but thine be done.” Just think how much more pleasant life would be in the home or workplace if we could be spared the complaints of those who are never satisfied if things don’t go just as they would like. This is not to say that we should blithely accept unjust situations or that we should not try to improve things that really need changing, but it is altogether possible to do so without that grumbling, complaining attitude that both Jesus and St. Benedict warn against.

Finally, I turn to the most significant of all the Christian virtues, the one that St. Paul writes about at the very end of our second reading: “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” If members of a monastic community or a lay family live in this way, they may expect to experience something of what the psalmist wrote in the 133rd psalm: “How good and how pleasant it is when brothers dwell together as one! It is like precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, upon the collar of his robe, or like the dew of

Hermon coming down upon the mountains of Zion. There the Lord has decreed a blessing, life forevermore.” That is the sort of vision that first attracted me to monastic life when I was still in high school: the vision of a group of persons all living together in a virtuous way, all advancing toward the common goal of the kingdom in a way of life marked by a healthy balance between prayer, work, holy reading, and some relaxation.

This is still what life in a monastery is and can be at its best. But one must never give in to unrealistic romanticization. Our oldest monk, Fr. Edmund, who will be 91 at the end of October, was once asked what was the best part of life in the monastery and he unhesitatingly replied, “the brethren.” When next asked what was the most difficult or challenging part, he gave the same answer, “the brethren.” This should not be surprising. When I was a so-called “junior monk,” that is, one still in temporary vows for three years, my junior master once made an important distinction. He said that joining a monastic community is very different from joining a country club. In the latter, one will normally find people of the same social standing, similar in wealth and educational background, very likely of the same political persuasion, and so forth. In a monastic community, on the other hand, there is and always has been a huge variety in the kinds of people who join: some from very cultured and affluent backgrounds, others much less so; some quite conservative in their political views, others much more liberal; some very well educated, others with very little schooling; some easy going and placid, others ready to fly off the handle at even minor annoyances.

To live in such circumstances calls for a realistic view of what to expect as well as perseverance in dealing with the challenges. This is probably why many monks would say that the next-to-last chapter of the Rule is the most important. It has the rather prosaic title “On the Good Zeal of Monks,” but its content is anything but prosaic. St. Benedict writes: “Just as there

is a wicked zeal of bitterness that separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal that separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life. This, then, is the good zeal that monks must foster with fervent love: they should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; and to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love. Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life."

To be able to bear with one another's weaknesses—and all of us have them in one form or another—and to be able to be truly obedient to one another are absolutely crucial for Benedictine spirituality, indeed, for Christian spirituality in general. This mutual obedience doesn't mean that some monks go around giving orders that others have to obey. No, the word "obedience" should be understood in terms of its Latin root, *audire*, which means to listen. The really obedient person is the one who is able to listen, to sense, to perceive the needs of another even before those needs might be expressed, and is able to respond in a way that is really loving, even if at times this means the sort of "tough love" that doesn't coddle another person but rather helps him or her to grow, whether spiritually, emotionally, or socially. When all the members of a monastic community or of a family strive to live according to this ideal, we may be confident that they are on the way to eternal life, are indeed experiencing something of it even now. May this morning's celebration of the Eucharist strengthen each of you in living this way.