

"The Things to Seek"

Colossians 3:1-11

August 1, 2010

10th Sunday After Pentecost

Focus! This is considered to be a good virtue which helps people to do things correctly now so that they might prepare for the future. Focus! Students, from a very early age, are encouraged to do this. Concerned parents seek out the best preschool and prep school to already begin preparing their toddlers for college and career. Focus! Young athletes are told to do this. Instead of just "playing" sports, children are organized into structured and coached leagues. At an early age, some children begin focusing on only one sport. Why? So that they might qualify for college scholarships and perhaps play in professional leagues. Focus! Business people are encouraged to do this. Save the right amount. Invest in the right places. People begin focusing in on their retirement shortly after beginning their careers. Focusing now is considered to be good so that you are ready later.

What about our faith lives? There we seem NOT to be focused at times. We get distracted by many things here on earth. Some of the things are good: happiness, wealth, prestige, success, praise, and so on. But setting our minds on getting these things can draw us away from God. When things are not going so well, we may ignore God altogether as we try harder to obtain these earthly things. When things are going well, we may view God as one important thing among many. If we finally DO obtain the things we have sought after and set our mind on to obtain and try to finally enjoy them, we may become like the rich fool in our Gospel reading. When he finally got all he wanted, congratulated himself on his diligence, and sat back to enjoy them, God said, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

On the other hand, some of the things which distract us are plainly sinful and will separate us from God. Paul lists some of these things in our lesson: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness (which is idolatry), anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, and lying. These things distract us because they are so much a part of the culture that surrounds us. Some

have become accepted by our culture as good. Not only are we not discouraged from doing these things, but we may be actively encouraged to do them. We run the danger of so conforming our lives to the present culture that we don't even know that we have cut ourselves off from God.

There needs to be a change of focus, but it might not be what you think. Human nature says that, if our focus has been on sinful things, then we need to focus on good behavior to make things right with God. If our focus has been on good things which draw us away from God, then we need to focus on giving up on the pleasures of this life and live a very dull life in order to please God. Neither change of focus helps.

The focus which is needed to clear up this problem is not *our* change of focus, but on Christ's continual focus on us. Everything He did, He did for you and me. He left His throne on high, voluntarily setting aside His divine power, to become a human being – “incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man”, as we confess in the Nicene Creed. His focus was to obey the Law of God (which was given for and to human beings only) in your place and to your credit. He did this so that He might give you His righteousness by faith to replace your sin and unbelief.

He went to the cross to suffer and die. His focus here was not to provide an example of how to suffer or show sacrificial love. It was to bear the sin and guilt which was humanity's responsibility alone to bear and win forgiveness for you by suffering God's wrath and anger for that sin in your place and to your credit. He did this so that you might be right with God through the forgiveness of your sins.

He went from the tomb to life again. His focus was not simply to perform a showy miracle or even just to conquer death. It was to bring a new and better life for you which not even death itself could destroy. He did this so that you might have life and have it to the full.

Now Christ is seated at the right hand of God. His focus, even now, is not on Himself and His glory, but on you. He rules all things now for the sake of the church – which includes you. His focus is that your life might endure, safe from every harm and foe.

When you were baptized, Christ's work which was focused on you was fulfilled in you. You received the benefits of Christ's work. You received the forgiveness for all of your sins. You received Christ's righteousness – His holiness – credited to your account before God. You received a new life – a new relationship - with God. You've been raised with Christ to a life on high which will never end.

This changes our focus in life now. Paul says, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." Don't focus on that which is sinful, even if the world gives its approval and it seems right or pleasurable. These things can drag you away from God and down to hell. Rather, seek to have and enjoy the things which are already yours in baptism and are with Christ at the right hand of God, namely, forgiveness, holiness, peace, and true life. These are things which keep you in relationship with God and will bring you to heaven.

Paul continues, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Don't focus on the things that are on earth, even if they are not sinful and provide you with life and enjoyment. They won't last and cannot fully satisfy. You have a new and different life now because of your baptism. Your old self has died. Your new self was born. Your life is hidden with Christ in God where it is nurtured with Word and Sacrament and is safe from the assaults of the devil and the temptations of this world.

In focusing in on the blessings which are ours in baptism and the new life hidden with Christ in God means that our life will change, not due to force but because of desire. Suppose you are outside today, mowing the lawn in the hot July sun. You come into the house, dirty and grimy, your clothes drenched in sweat. After peeling off your clothes and enjoying a cool and refreshing shower, do you have to be told not to put those same clothes back on? Having been cleansed and refreshed by the shower, you eagerly desire to put on clean and fresh clothes.

The same is true of our baptismal life. We are, by nature, dirty and grimy. Our lives are drenched with the sweat of sin. In the cool and refreshing waters of Holy Baptism, our lives of sin are taken off. We are cleansed from our sin. Do we really need to be told not to go back to the dirt and

grime of our sin drenched lives and to put on “new clothes”, that is, a new life? I don’t think so. As new people with new life in Christ, that is something we eagerly desire.

Paul uses words that literally mean to take off clothes and put on clothes. We are to take off what is earthly – the “clothes” of sin: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness which is idolatry, as well as anger, wrath, malice, slader, obscene talk, and lying. After our baptisms, we are to put on the fresh clothes of the new self which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Just past our text, Paul writes, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” (Col. 3:12)

When our new selves are being renewed in knowledge through exposure to the Word of God and renewed after the image of is creator through our very real connection to our Creator as we eat His body and drink His blood in the Sacrament, God works in us and through to put off the things we once walked in and because of which God’s wrath is coming. God works in us and through us to put on the newness of life which was given to us as a gift in Holy Baptism and to exhibit that newness in every day life.

For twenty years, the recruiting slogan of the US Army was “Be all that you can be.” Many think this would make a good moral slogan or, perhaps, even a slogan for the Church. As rousing as this slogan is for the Army, it fails miserably for us in the Church. “All that we can be” is not good enough for God’s holiness, no matter how hard we try. We will always fall short. I would suggest that a better slogan would be, “Be all that you already are.” Jesus Christ has already done the heavy lifting when it comes to our status before God. He focused on us and obtained for us forgiveness for our guilt, holiness for our sin, life for our death. These are accompolished actions, the benefits which we have received in Holy Baptism. We already have His peace, His holiness, and His life. Let that influence you in the things which you put off from your life and in the things you put on in your life. Seek the things that are above and your will be at peace with God. Set your mind on the things that are above and you will be content within. Be all that you already are through Christ Jesus. Amen.