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Homiletics

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HOMILETICS

ROGATE

MAY 3

Worship Supplement:

The new translation of the Lord's Prayer

Rogate Sunday is a good time to examine our prayer life. In the Gospel for today our Lord indicates what a healthy prayer life involves. It involves not only an awareness of God, not only a feeling of His presence, but a conviction that He is able to stabilize or alter the course of our lives, always for our good. It believes that He is willing to listen to the most insignificant concern on the part of His children, as well as the most staggering challenge. "If you ask anything . . . He will give it to you."

What is the greatest challenge to change? We can see our own reluctance to change in little things, even things as small as a shift from "Thee" to "You" for the reference to God. But other things too—even a change of conduct, change in habits, change in relationships with other groups of human beings—these are relatively small compared with the greatest challenge to the changing power of our God—the change of our will.

In the Lord's Prayer, which we will pray later in the words of a new translation, we say, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Here is the key to a meaningful, dynamic prayer life, but even more—here is the basic need for a truly changed Christian life. If God's will is going to be done on earth—and we know it is, and we pray that it will continue to be—if God's will is to be done in our life, then is not the secret a will that is attuned to God's will? To possess that kind of a spirit, the attitude that wills what God wills, that loves and desires those things which a loving Father delights in giving to His people, this is something more than earthly. But it is the basic change that is needed as we face up to every testing

moment, every time of decision in our lives. It is this change that means a really valid and dynamic Christianity.

That is a significant *Point* for a sermon—not simply to call attention to this need but to apply the power of the Gospel by words preached at this given time to Christians who seek help in Christian willing, so that their wills will be stabilized more in the will of God or that their wills will be altered in the direction of God's will.

The *Problem* has always been centered in the will. At creation God designed man as a creature with a free will, who could choose to follow God's will or to assert his own. The basic fall was the collapse of the first man and woman into self-will rather than continuing in stable willing along with God. The problem is still ours today. God has not transformed Christians into men and women who are once again wholly in the image of their Creator. He has restored to them a new will, but the battle with the self continues. Think your way back into any recent sinful act. Before it happened, was there not a time of decision, perhaps a sequence of arguments between self-will and God's will, consciously debated? And if you failed, was it not because you did indeed do what you did not really want to do?

"Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" was St. Paul's plea, and it is ours. The answer is the victory which God gives us through Jesus Christ. There is *Power*. He who taught us to pray His prayer Himself prayed this petition. He lived a life of perfect obedience to God's will, wanting what God wanted every moment. He was tempted in all things just as we are, but His will to do God's will never failed. This was not an effort on God's part to show us up, but God's determined method in love to *shore* us up, to strengthen again our will to do His will.

Our Lord's obedience is counted for our record, it makes up for our spinelessness. And finally, when in the Garden Jesus Christ took on the task which in God's plan would atone for our sin and be the suffering which we deserved but which God would Himself bear for us, He prayed this prayer, "Nevertheless, not My will but Thine be done." He saved us in the time of trial. He delivered us from evil. And He continues to do so. In every time of testing He gives us the right to call for help, for help to be strong-willed. And day after day His Word reaches us to be our strength. As surely as Jesus Himself came in the flesh, Jesus reaches us in the Scriptures. That Word reaches us now. The body and blood of Jesus Christ can strengthen us now—so that we are changed.

ASCENSION DAY

MAY 7

Worship Supplement: The Offertory for Ascensiontide (pp. 31—32)

The Epistle and the Gospel for the day both contain the historical report of our Lord's ascension. The offertory makes clear a *Point* for Christian living: There should be glad songs in the tents of the righteous because our Lord is highly exalted!

But both the Epistle and the Gospel indicate a more realistic reaction on the part of our Lord's disciples. They stood there looking up into heaven, hardly a cheering section for the exalted Christ. The Gospel begins with our Lord "upbraiding them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw Him after He had risen." If anything, these "righteous" seemed to have crawled back into their tents more like defeated Philistines who were convinced that no one could put Goliath together again.

And we Christians often live with this same *Problem*. We are all too aware that

our Head is not visibly present among us. And all this talk about our being the body of Christ seems mystical and unreal since we cannot see our Head visibly attached to us and directing us. What if a man whose heart had completely failed him and who was in the midst of a transplant surgery, should groggily insist that the heart machine which had taken over his life function must always sit there by the side of his bed where he could see the machinery function and *be* his beating heart? Wouldn't all men say that he would be much better off after the surgeon had inserted a new heart in his chest and closed up the flesh and sutured it with disappearing thread and given him the chance again to live this marvelously "abnormal," miraculously restored life?

"It is to your advantage that I go away," our Lord tells us as He told His disciples. That advantage followed the even greater advantage which accrues to us because He came in the first place. "The right hand of the Lord did valiantly!" Recount it—for here is the *Power* for a life that is a glad song! See our embattled world arrayed against God, taunting Him, waving shields against Him, and rattling armor as if it could withstand His judgment. But He came, baring His mighty arm, not to destroy us but to restore us. It was a strange battle—He permitted Himself to be taken and slain by wicked hands. But the life He laid down He took up again. This Goliath did put Himself together again in spite of all the king's horses and men attempted to do to make it impossible. And why now are there glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous? Because the Lord did do valiantly, yes; but also because He is highly exalted. Because He emptied Himself of His prerogatives of divine power and became obedient unto death for us, God has highly exalted Him and given Him a name that is above every name. At His name we bend the knee—for He is

obviously victor in His resurrection; but even more, He is invisibly world ruler, declared so by His ascension. The shields of the earth belong to God. Sing praises! And moreover He shares His life and victory with us. He has given us hearts beating with His life and love so that we can live His way, in love to His Father and our Father, to ourselves, and to the least of His brothers in the world. The Spirit which He has sent to us, all unseen, bears witness with our spirit that we are the sons of God as His new life surges through our will and actions. Sing praises!

Material supplied by
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EXAUDI

MAY 10

Worship Supplement:

"At the Name of Jesus" (Hymn 743)

Our Lord Jesus Christ sits on the right hand of God. He is glorified above all. His name is above all names in heaven and earth. He who makes intercession on behalf of His church is worthy of all praise and worship. Every tongue should confess Him as the Lord and at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. The hymn makes the *Point* at once, "We should call Him Lord!"

The *Problem* is suggested in the day's Gospel (John 15:26—16:4), where Jesus points out that His purpose in telling His disciples about coming persecution was to keep them from falling away. As incredible as it might seem, people will kill Christians and think they are offering service to God. But they can do this and be so horribly mistaken because they have not known the Father, nor Jesus. If persecution should make us deny Him who is Lord of all, how awful our *Problem*. But if in our easy age we become so accustomed to the "King of glory" that our greeting becomes a casual "Hi" as we stroll by about our own business or pleas-

ure, is not our *Problem* even more agonizing for Him — and for us?

"Name him, brothers, name him —
Strong your love as death —
But with awe and wonder,
And with bated breath;
He is God the Savior,
He is Christ the Lord,
Ever to be worshiped,
Evermore adored." (Stanza 4)

All the paradoxical positions in which we find ourselves should but call our attention to the true *Power* which Jesus Christ released for us by the paradoxical situation in which He lived and died for us. The kingdom of God is shown on earth in paradox. A mustard seed here — only in eternity shall we see the fullness of Christ's kingdom. The churches do not represent the full picture of Christ's kingdom. The church itself is greater. But it is a church militant, not triumphant. The churches suffer, and Christians suffer with them. Jesus Christ Himself was crucified although He was the sinless Son of God. But Christ rose again from the dead. The church will not go through death. It will prevail. Until the day of consummation the church and Christians will suffer, but they will prevail because of the fact that Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God and makes intercession on behalf of His church, *corpus Christi*. The Epistle alerts us to what we should expect — "the end of all things is at hand" (1 Peter 4:7-11). But in the totality of life, Jesus Christ is Lord. As stewards of God's varied graces, we employ them for one another, "in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To Him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

"Name him, brothers, name him —"
"We should call Him Lord!"

Material supplied by
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THE FEAST OF PENTECOST

MAY 17

Worship Supplement: The Offertory for Whitsuntide (p. 32)

The Holy Spirit is here! Where? Is He lingering in the narthex? Is He waiting in the church study? Is He perhaps a part of your row here in the sanctuary? Maybe He is an idea, a feeling, an emotion dispelled by a headache but brought back by the beautiful anthem.

None of these imaginary concepts fit the fact that Jesus said He, God, would live with His believers spiritually, personally, here in this world. "Lo, I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20) and "I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you" (John 14:18). He specifically promised to do this through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The *Point*: I want my hearers to experience through this sermon the personal presence of the Holy Spirit — that they can know Him in all their life situations, that they are able continually to say, "The Holy Spirit is here."

To bring the Scripture into the mind of the hearers, three thought forms are to be used: wineskins, eyes, wills. Wineskins will need to be explained historically and then used symbolically. (Eph. 5:18, "Be not drunk with wine . . . , but be filled with the Spirit," would probably authorize the use of this symbol. Then the analogy of Luke 5:37-39 will be brought to bear on the text to show that the Holy Spirit does not fit into the lives of all men universally, but only those made new by Christ.) Eyes or sight will be used to create the physical-spiritual tension. The will confronts us with the person of God in us, who must be in charge, or we are consigned to internal civil war.

The hinge on which the sermon turns is the vivifying of Christ's promised presence in lives He has made new. The "here and now" of spiritual presence must pervade the

sermon. It must build from the problem of our being unfit for Christ's Spirit to dwell with us to the joyous climax of, "He is here in me; now let Him live!"

The outline might be as follows:

The Holy Spirit Is Here

John 14:23-31

- I. He does not live in unfit lives.
 - A. Old wineskins cannot contain Him. John 14:24a
 - B. Weak eyes cannot see Him. John 14:25-26; John 14:8
 - C. Stubborn wills cannot stand Him. John 14:25
- II. He lives in lives made new by Christ.
 - A. The new wineskin from God expands with His love. John 14:23
 - B. The strong eyes from God see more than the physical. Acts 2; John 14:29
 - C. The will yielded to God follows the Holy Spirit into an abundant life. John 14:26-27; John 15:5

The *Problem* is starkly brought out in the unyielding, secular pride of a humanistic life which cannot receive the Holy Spirit because it has not received Christ. Under Section I, custom and dogma, physical and secular idols, and human ego might be discussed as barriers to the life of the Holy Spirit in us.

The power is dramatized in II-A in the words, "If a man love Me" To love Christ means to love His incarnation, life, bloody death, resurrection — all of which was accomplished for us. Christ weeping over Jerusalem with "come unto Me" will be part of His reaching for our love. In II-B the importance of eyes being opened to the reality of the Holy Spirit is stressed. We are not to be "drunk with wine" (Acts 2:13, 15), but filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33). In II-C the world's kind of peace will be contrasted to the peace which is ours as we yield to our sovereign, almighty God.

In conclusion Peter in the courtyard denying Christ is brought into view. This denying Peter is contrasted to Peter who looked into the eyes of Christ. As Christ gazed at him, Peter responded; first he wept, then he preached on Pentecost. So may this Holy Spirit be here in you today with gifts of strength, wisdom, peace. Therefore you can sing:

"With mighty chariotry, twice ten thousand,
 thousands upon thousands,
 the Lord came from Sinai into the holy place.
 When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.
 Summon your might, O God;
 show your strength, O God, for you have wrought for us.
 Because of your temple at Jerusalem kings bear gifts to you.
 My vows to you I must perform, O God;
 I will render thank offerings to you.
 For you have delivered my soul from death,
 yes, my feet from falling,
 that I may walk before God in the light of life."

THE FEAST OF THE HOLY TRINITY MAY 24

Worship Supplement: "I Bind unto Myself Today" (Hymn 746)

I want my hearers to test their relation to the triune God, to His kingdom, by the crucial encounter of Nicodemus and Christ. The awful alternatives confront us: perishing by missing the new life offered by the action of God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — or living in the relation to God that Christ calls "born again" and "eternal life." This may be a "think" sermon, but if it succeeds, the patterns of truth implanted will bind the life of the hearer to God in a security that will show in decision and crisis.

The scene of John, chapter 3, comes vividly before us . . . the confident, educated, successful Pharisee tinged with curiosity about and dissatisfaction with his own standing in the kingdom of God — this person confronts the King of the kingdom of God. Jesus puts forth three tests by which Nicodemus (and we) can evaluate our relation to God. Christ says the results are either "perishing status" or "eternally living status."

The *Problem* is focused on the hearer's inability to do this thing — enter the kingdom of God. The *Problem* is brought into sharp focus when the challenge comes to test the relation to God: Is it by God's power, according to God's plan, for God's purpose? Some of Nicodemus' naive unboundness to God is related to the glib worship of the followers of Christ today:

"Not that they starve but that they starve so dreamlessly;
 Not that they sow but that they seldom reap."
 Vachel Lindsay

The dynamism of Christ's answer to our unrelatedness to His kingdom begins with a wide, eternal plan. It narrows to show that power to appropriate the benefits of this plan comes from only one source, and that source of salvation is pinpointed — the Son who gave His life by being lifted up. We come finally, kneeling, looking up at the lifted-up One, grasping by faith the Way, Life, and Truth. And we can sing our acceptance of the work of our triune God:

"I bind unto myself today
 The strong name of the Trinity,
 By invocation of the same,
 The Three in One and One in Three.
 I bind this day to me forever,
 By power of faith, Christ's incarnation;
 His baptism in Jordan river;
 His death on cross for my salvation;
 His bursting from the spiced tomb;
 His riding up the heavenly way"

Test Your Relation to God

- I. The plan of God the Father is the only way God offers. John 3:3
- A. The way of a world of people who could reject Him
(consequent unfitness for the kingdom of God — "cannot see")
- B. The way of a Savior who could redeem
(the justice of bringing unfit rejecters back into His kingdom — "born again")
- C. Conclusion — Rom. 11:33
- II. The power of God the Holy Spirit is the only life God offers. John 3:5
- A. A man is helpless to change himself or bring God anything.
Rom. 11:34-35
- B. Therefore it is wholly a miracle of God the Holy Spirit to be born again. John 3:8
- III. The purpose of God the Son is the only truth God offers. John 3:11 (John 1:12)
- A. The purpose is to be "saved." John 3:17-18, 36
(that is, related where one had been unrelated, living where one had been perishing)
- B. The purpose is the whole enterprise of life.
- (1) Springing up — John 4:14
- (2) Feeding — John 6:35
- (3) Overflowing — John 7:38-39

Therefore the plan, power, purpose of real life is of Him, our triune God, through Him and to Him, to whom be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:36)

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TRINITY I

MAY 31

Worship Supplement: "The Voice of God Is Calling" (Hymn 776)

Particulars — The sermon is to accent the church and social concerns, making use of Hymn 776 in the *Worship Supplement*, as well as the Epistle ("perfect love casts out fear"), probably as the text, and also the Gospel (the rich man and Lazarus).

Point — "Just as long as I've got my health, I don't really care to be rich," expresses the personal philosophy of many Americans — especially of some in no danger of becoming poor. But maybe others are sincere when they say it, in which case it isn't a bad outlook to have. And whoever does, must certainly sympathize with the poor rich man in this morning's Gospel. That's correct — poor rich man, not poor Lazarus. Oh, not that we wouldn't sympathize with Lazarus, too! But that rich man wasn't as well off as we might think. Sure, he had money. But healthwise he was really lacking. For he was not only blind — to the needs of Lazarus at his gate — but deaf as well — to the voice of God calling to him through the needs of the poor beggar (stanza 1). God through Lazarus was saying something to him, just as He says something to us through all the needy people in our time. This is what He is continually saying in "Moses and the prophets" — and in the evangelists and the apostles. Abraham said of the rich man's brothers that if they would not hear Moses and the prophets they would also ignore one risen from the dead. Yet in His grace He has given us One risen from the dead. And He speaks to us as well by these voices of the dying, the suffering, the hungry. And what He's saying is that we ought to hear His Word and to give ourselves to those who need us in love, even as in love He gave Himself to us.

Problem — Like the rich man we are

deaf, or at least a little hard of hearing. For instead of emptying ourselves of pride and plenty (stanza 4), we debate about whether as the church we have actually been called to satisfy our fellow citizens' social needs. We even debate whether we should feed and clothe our fellow Christians. And when we lose the argument, we then make excuses as to why we are unable to love in a tangible way. But underlying this is the deeper malady of unbelief, the refusal to heed God's specific Word, the ignoring of the One risen from the dead and the voices of the least of His dying brothers. We fail to appropriate the wonderful love of God in Christ. And not living in and experiencing the security of forgiveness and life in the victory of Christ, we are left with our own resources to become fearful, petty, greedy, competitive, insecure. We have to, for it's the only way—we think—to live. Yet, being nothing more than dust and ashes (stanza 3), such living can only lead to dying (rich man). The deafness sin causes is fatal.

Power — Knowing our inability — our dust-and-ashes-ness, God's fatherly heart

went out to us, prompting Him to give His dearest possession, His only Son. That Son came. He answered His Father's call and came to release us from "the bonds of shame and greed." He did it by living out the law of love to God and all men, and He obeyed it to the letter. Giving Himself in perfect love, even unto death, He destroyed the power of sin and death over us. For He did not stay dead. This One did rise from the dead. And He gives that resurrection and that life to all who will believe. Hence we are free. Sin has no power any longer to kill us. And this means that not death but only unending life is now our lot. And so we have nothing to fear, nothing for which to compete, nothing for which to be petty and greedy. Life, all of life, is ours through Christ, even the ability to hear plainly our Father's voice as He calls to us from the Scriptures—and from the ghetto and from Asia and from Africa—inviting us to live in His love.

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