

The Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	1 Kings 19:4-8
<i>Response</i>	O taste and see that the Lord is good!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 4:30—5:2
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’
<i>Gospel</i>	John 6:41-51

The nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time continues the Church’s journey through the letter to the Ephesians, with a reading from Ephesians 4:30-5:2. So it’s a short passage, but it’s a very beautiful passage on grieving the Holy Spirit. So let’s see what Paul has to say about grieving the Holy Spirit. In chapter 4, verse 30, we read:

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.¹

Beautiful, beautiful words from Ephesians. Okay, so a few things. First, the entire passage here is under the initial exhortation of not grieving the Holy Spirit. It’s a powerful image. We don’t usually think of making God sad. I think most of us are kind of aware of the fact that we can make God angry. And so it’s very common that people will try to exhort others to avoid sin in order to avoid making God angry, as well as people who often feel, “Oh, something bad happened to me. Is

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

God angry at me?” And I think that’s a pretty natural response based on just human growth and childhood where kids break rules as young children, they just tend to make their parents angry. That’s one response.

But we maybe aren’t quite to think of our sin as causing God grief, because we don’t tend to think of God as suffering sadness. And of course there’s a true sense in which God in Himself is impassable. We can’t do anything to God. I don’t want to go down that particular philosophical road right now, that’s certainly true. But the language of Scripture will often use anthropomorphisms to describe God’s response using terms drawn from human experience and human emotion that are analogous to human experience and human emotion.

And in this case, the image is of making the Holy Spirit sad, causing grief to the Holy Spirit through sin. And so Paul says don’t do that:

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (Ephesians 4:30)

So what is it that grieves the Holy Spirit? Paul gives us one of his very, very helpful — although not very popular — list of vices. So every now and then in his letters, as Paul’s writing, once he gets to his section of moral exhortation where he begins (usually towards the end of the letter) ... where he begins exhorting his readers to live a certain kind of life in Christ. He’s calling them to follow the standards of morality and charity and virtue that are part of living life in Christ. He will often give lists of both vices and virtues, of sins and of gifts of the Holy Spirit or fruits of the Spirit or things that are life-giving acts in Christ and then things that bring death, spiritual death to those who commit them.

And so in this case, he lists some vices that grieve the Holy Spirit. So what kind of things grieve the heart of God, grieve the spirit of God? Number one: bitterness... bitterness. Number two: wrath or anger. Number three: clamor.

Now this one is interesting. We don’t tend to use the word clamor very often, but the Greek word is *kraugē*. It literally means “shouting”. So it’s tied to anger. Anger often leads to shouting, right? So Paul says no shouting.

Slander – and again, this one is a little strange. The English word is “slander” but the Greek word is *blasphēmia*, which we have a pretty good English cognate for. It’s “blasphemy”. I’m not sure why they didn’t put “blasphemy” in the translation and they put slander instead. Some translations will have “reviling,” and that’s good too ... but it’s a little general, because reviling is something you can do to anything. But blasphemy is when we revile something or someone holy. Like in profanity, we will often blaspheme the name of God or the Blessed Virgin or the name of Christ.

And then finally, he mentions malice as well — hatred for another. So you can see here there is some overlap with the vices Paul lists here and the seven capital sins — in particular, the sin of anger, of wrath, one of the classical capital sins. But for me, what’s fascinating is that Paul is saying to the Ephesians — who again, are converts from paganism, so he’s trying to teach them about what life in Christ looks like. And he says, “Look, in Christ ...” — he doesn’t just say, “Try to moderate your wrath. Don’t blaspheme too often. Don’t shout too often.” No, he says, “Put it away. Expunge it from your life. Take it out. Cut it off.”

All wrath, all anger, all malice, blasphemies. Christians should not be uttering blasphemies. Christians should not be shouting in wrath and anger at one another. You can think here about the kind of domestic strife that happens in families that are plagued by anger and by wrath and shouting ... which often leads to blasphemies and cursing and profanity.

These things grieve the Holy Spirit of God when those who are in Christ, who are sealed with the Spirit, engage in them. So instead of that, Paul calls the Ephesians to virtue and to charity. So in particular, notice what he highlights here. You want to make the Holy Spirit happy?

... and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)

Now that last line should sound familiar. It’s a little echo of the Our Father in there. So in the Our Father, we pray that line, “forgive us our trespasses” — so far, so

good — “as we forgive those who trespass against us” ... the most terrifying words in the New Testament is that word “as” in the Our Father. Because it actually means we’re asking God to make the standard of forgiveness that we receive from him, the same that we give to others.

And I was actually reading — I can’t remember whether it was John Cassian or John Chrysostom, I’d have to go back and look at it — one of the 4th, 5th century Church Fathers (it must have been Chrysostom, because he was preaching to a congregation) who actually says that in the ancient Church, in some congregations, the people (the laity) would not pronounce that line of the Lord’s Prayer. They wouldn’t say it out loud. When they got to that part of the Lord’s Prayer, everyone went quiet, because they actually understood what it meant. They weren’t just rambling, kind of mumbling it off — you know, “forgive us our trespasses” — without even thinking, while thinking about what they’re going to eat for lunch or something. They were listening to the words, they did know what it meant, and they didn’t want God to apply the same standard to them that they apply to others ... so they wouldn’t say that line of the prayer. They would skip it. Fascinating.

So Paul here, though, is making that the model. So if you don’t want to grieve the Spirit of God, you have to forgive others as you yourself are forgiven.

For the measure you give will be the measure you get back. (Luke 6:38b)

So all this is talking about (once again) morality, about life in Christ. And Paul in Ephesians 5:1 brings up the language of imitation. It’s become very important in the spiritual tradition of the Church. It’s known as the *Imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God — not just to be in a relationship with God. People like to talk about that: “Do you have a relationship with Christ? Do you have a relationship with God?” Yes. Are you like God? Are you striving to imitate God? And that’s what Paul calls them to:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Again, in Judaism, they didn't use the term "morality" to describe doing good, avoiding evil. The language they use was a Hebrew word known as *halakha*. *Halakha* comes from the Hebrew word "to walk", the verb. So keeping the law, choosing good, avoiding evil, was *halakha*. So whenever Paul uses that language of walking, he's always talking about morality — what we call morality or ethics. That's the context of what he's describing here.

So how do we walk? We walk in charity. That's what makes the Holy Spirit happy, because the Holy Spirit *is* the eternal love of the Father and the Son. He *is* charity itself. And Christ, of course, manifests that to us in both the way He loves us and gave Himself as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God.

Okay, so, in closing, just a couple words from the living tradition here about these particular verses from Ephesians. A very short verse today, but I think rich and plenty to think about. The first one is from St. Cyril of Jerusalem. Cyril of Jerusalem was a 4th century bishop of Jerusalem, and he wrote a famous series of catecheses on the sacraments. It's one of our most ancient descriptions of the sacraments, where he's basically speaking to people who are going through the Rites of Initiation into the Church at Lent, who are coming in at Easter (like what happens today in RCIA). And he's giving them a biblical explanation of the Sacrament of Baptism, Sacrament of the Eucharist, and then also the Sacrament of Anointing — which, in the west, would come to be known as Confirmation.

And it's fascinating, because Cyril connects what we call Confirmation with this passage from Ephesians, about being sealed in the Spirit. So listen to what he says:

[B]e mindful of the Holy Spirit of whom we now speak. For He is present, ready *to seal your soul* and He shall give you *that heavenly and divine seal at which demons tremble*, as it is written: "And in him you too, when you believed, were sealed with the Holy Spirit of the promise" [Eph 1:13].²

Cyril continues:

² Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 17.35 (trans. R. Deffarari)

He [the Holy Spirit] will grant you gifts of grace of every kind, if you do not grieve Him by sin.

See the language there of grieving.

For it is written: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” [Eph 4:30]. How then, dearly beloved, preserve the grace? *Be prepared to receive the grace, and once you have received it, do not cast it away.*³

So what’s going on — what is Cyril talking about? A few things. First, he’s using the language of being sealed with the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 4 and Ephesians 1 to describe the sacrament of being anointed on the forehead in what the eastern Fathers called chrismation or anointing, and what the Latin Fathers in the west call Confirmation (eventually).

So, this should strike you, because you might recall at your Confirmation, the words of the sacrament (that affect the sacrament), just like we have the words of Institution, “This is my body, this is my blood”... in the western rite, in the Latin rite, in the Roman rite, ordinary form of Confirmation, the bishop says, “Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Where does that language come from? It comes from the letter to the Ephesians. So there’s a direct link between the language of the bishop and the sacrament, and the language of Paul in Ephesians ... and this connection goes all the way back to the 4th century in the writings of St. Cyril of Jerusalem.

The second thing that he says, though, is really crucial, is that you have to avoid sin so that you don’t cast away the grace that you receive in confirmation. And this is really very important. We tend to forget that Confirmation is one of the few indelible sacraments. There are certain sacraments that seal you, that bind you, that leave a mark on the soul that is there for all of eternity. Baptism is an indelible sacrament. It can only be done once, it’s irrepeatable, and it’s indelible. It can’t be

³ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 17.37

undone. You can't be unbaptized. You're sealed with the mark of your Baptism for all eternity.

Holy Orders (priesthood) is also an indelible sacrament. You're a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek. Marriage lasts forever — oh, no, it doesn't, sorry. No, Jesus is really clear, though — there will be no marriage in the resurrection, although a lot of people get uncomfortable when He says that. But marriage passes away with death. The bond and the union of the Sacrament of Marriage end with death.

Confirmation, however, is different. Confirmation is also an indelible mark. You are sealed by the Holy Spirit for all eternity, and so any act of sin — grave sin, in particular, obviously he's going to talk about here — after Confirmation is a violation of that seal of the Holy Spirit. So he's saying, don't cast away the graces that you received in your Confirmation. Be prepared for it.

So a lot of times people say, "Well, Dr. Pitre, I didn't feel anything after Confirmation. I didn't have any experience of grace. I didn't really see any change in my life." And sometimes, if I know the person well, I can ask, "Well, did you go to Confession before Confirmation? Did you prepare to receive it, or did you receive it in a state of mortal sin?" That's going to make a big difference on whether the graces you receive bear fruit or not ... if the sacrament is received in a state of grace. The *Catechism* teaches this, that Confirmation must be received in a state of grace. That's important, because it's a sacrament that needs to be actualized in bearing fruit, not violated through grave sin.

So very important point here, that even in the 4th century, Cyril is having to tell the people who are going to be confirmed, "You need to be prepared for this, and you also need to realize that it's calling you to true, real holiness once you've received it ... so don't cast away the graces."

So that's the sacramental side of it. What about just the moral side of it? There's another line from St. Gregory the Great, and I'll end with this. When Paul talks about the virtues that Christians are called to of kindness and gentleness and forgiveness toward one another, St. Gregory the Great gave some really great

practical advice about how to live that out. So you might think, “Well, Dr. Pitre, it’s nice for Paul to say I need to be kind and tender, but I’m German. I’ve got a German temperament. I’ve got a short fuse. What do I do? What are some practical ways to strive to grow in the virtue of patience, tenderness, and kindness towards others?”

Well, Gregory the Great wrote a little book called *Morals in Job*. This is not all of it. This is just the only volumes I have. There are a couple more. It’s actually a massive commentary on Job. It’s one of the first great works of moral theology in the history of the Church, so what Gregory did is he walked through the book of Job, but he did a moral exposition. He would allow the verses of Job to kind of inspire him to give these various reflections on morality in the Christian life. So the book is called *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job*. And you’ll sometimes just see it called *Moralia in Job* — that’s the more traditional title.

In any case, in book 5, paragraph 81 in the *Morals of Job*, Gregory gives us this advice, so listen to this holy, holy pope. He says:

[One] way to retain an even temper is that when we notice the transgressions of others, we may recall our own sins and transgressions against them... Just as fire is extinguished by water, when anger rises in the mind, all should remember their own guilt, because we should be ashamed not to forgive sins when we remember that we have often sinned against God or neighbor and needed forgiveness.”⁴

I’ve mentioned elsewhere about how we so easily forget Jesus, and when we forget Christ dwelling with us, we tend to sin. Gregory is saying the same thing about our own sin. We, especially if you’re inclined to harbor grudges, if you harbor grudges, that means you remember other people’s sins very well. How well do you remember your own? Or do you forget about those? Do you accuse others and excuse yourself? That’s a great recipe for always being angry, because if you call to mind your own sin, you’ll tend to be more merciful toward those who sin against you.

⁴ Gregory the Great, *Morals in Job* 5.81

And so what Gregory is saying here is, when someone sins against you, when someone makes you angry, try to take a pause and remember the times you have sinned against that person. And when that does, like water can extinguish a fire, so too the memory of your own sin can extinguish the fire of anger that's starting to get kindled in the heart. St. Frances de Sales says this ... don't even let the fire — don't let it get started. Put it out immediately, because like gasoline, the flame of anger grows fast and it spreads quick. And once it's raging, it's much harder to get it under control than when it's just getting started. Which if you've ever played with fire or built a fire, you know what I'm talking about. Anger is that way.

So the way to douse it at the beginning is when someone sins against you, as soon as they sin against you, call to mind something that you've done against them in the past, and it'll help to extinguish it. Because we need to remember and not forget — we should be ashamed, actually, he says — not to forgive people when as Paul says:

... God in Christ forgave you.