

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Ephesians 3:13-21 (1 Kings 17:17-24; Luke 7:11-17)

Isn't the purpose and the story of the Christian life, ***"to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,"*** as Paul prays in our second lesson? We are constantly learning as Christians. We are learning the extent of God's love for us. And it's not easy, is it? It's a process. Sure, most of us would say that God loves us, but being willing to grant in a general sense that God loves me is different than knowing that love, recognizing that love, being embraced and moved by that love, starting to actually wrap your head around the breadth and length and height and depth of it.

Thinking that we can do whatever we'd like because God loves us and will forgive us betrays that we do not yet know to any meaningful extent the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. Imagine a son who says to himself, "My parents will forgive me no matter what I do, because they love me, so I might as well do whatever I'd like, even if it brings them shame." Imagine a wife who says to herself, "My wife will forgive me no matter what I do, because my spouse loves me, so I'd might as well do whatever I'd like, even if it brings my spouse shame." That daughter or husband doesn't understand her parents' or his wife's love at all, or appreciate it at all. Love understood and appreciated results in love shown, not love abused. Yet that is just how we treat God when we take His love for granted, when we bring Him shame by our shameful words, thoughts, and actions. If sin cost God His life, how can we ever consider sin a light, trivial, flippant thing, laugh about it or race back to it? As St. John wrote in his first epistle, his epistle on love, ***"Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth"*** (3:18). And, ***"By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments"*** (5:2).

In other words, someone living in stubborn rejection of some part of God's clear commands, with no repentance and no intention to change what they are doing, might claim to be a Christian, might even be a member of a Christian Church, but he or she is in fact and in God's eyes no Christian at all. And that is not me judging anyone. That is God's Word judging the willful sinner. **Love God above all. Use His name correctly. Gladly hear and learn His Word. Honor your parents and those in authority. Don't murder. Don't have sex outside of marriage. Don't steal. Don't gossip. Don't covet.** God's Word is clear, and those who know the love of Christ that held Him even unto death to the tree of the cross might struggle with these commands, but they will certainly not throw in the towel and give themselves into persistent sin against them. Such a person has not the grace of God, but certainly is in need of it.

But thinking that God's love is a license to sin is not the only way we demonstrate that we do not know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. There is another sign to that coin. We also demonstrate that we do not know the love of Christ as we ought when we despair, when, finally sorrowing over our sins that before did not sufficiently trouble us, we think that God can't or won't forgive them, at least not anymore, not after so many, that perhaps the last sin was the straw that broke the camel's back or that the last trespass was the one step too far to turn back. St. John has some important words to us in this regard as well in his epistle on love. He writes beautifully, ***"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"*** (1:8,9). In other words, never despair of God's love in Christ.

In our Holy Gospel, Jesus and His apostles encountered a funeral procession on its way out of town. The consequences of the fall into sin were on full display. A man, a young man, the only son of his widowed mother, had died. Nothing drives our mortality home like the death of a young person, does it? We are not immortal after all. Life is not a given. This young man, this only son of this poor widow had died, and now he was on his way to burial, mourners crying at the top of their lungs, eyes filled with tears all about, and Jesus, standing in their way with His

ragtag troop of disciples. And He must have looked crazy. He didn't step aside like any decent person would have done. No, the most decent Man to walk the earth instead walked up to the bier, the wood on which they carried the dead body, touched it, and spoke what must have seemed like the greatest foolishness those gathered had ever heard. He said, ***"Young man, I say to you, arise."*** I can't help but imagine many of them gasping in unbelief. He was ruining a perfectly good funeral. This poor widowed mother was trying to lay her only son to rest and Jesus was playing games. But what happened? ***"And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother."*** Jesus speaks, and what He speaks must happen.

This same Jesus speaks His commands to you. He takes the Ten Commandments and makes them even more thorough. He tells you not only not to murder, but not to hate or grow unnecessarily angry. He tells you not only not to commit adultery, but not to lust. He tells you not only not to steal, but not to envy. And He isn't joking. He isn't giving advice or suggestions. The Ten Commandments were not written on comment cards. God speaks, Jesus speaks His Word, and His Word is meant to be, and God help those who get in its way.

Elijah had fled the famine predicted in our service last week to the widow's house, as the Lord commanded. They'd been miraculously fed from a jar of flour and a jug of oil that didn't run out. But then the unimaginable happened. The widow's son, miraculously kept alive through this food from God, died. And the widow was upset, and understandably so. And the widow did what many of us do when upset. She spoke careless words, but words that nonetheless expressed what she was feeling and thinking at the moment, which is what we might have thought at the moment as well, isn't it? ***"What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!"*** And what did Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, reply? He didn't argue with her. There is a time for correcting the grieving, and there is a time for letting their words slide. You can't have a frank discussion with a drunk man, and you can't reason with those overcome by grief, and so he put off a discussion of the matter, showed compassion to her in her sorrow, and then said, ***"Give me your son."*** And taking the son, he took it up with God: ***"O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?' Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.' And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived."*** Elijah brought the widow's son back to life, or rather, God did through Him. It's no coincidence, then, that Jesus in our Holy Gospel did the same, proving His prophetic office to the people of Israel. And what was the widow's reaction? ***"And the woman said to Elijah, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.'"*** The Word of the Lord is what had done this, and the Word of the Lord is what Elijah had spoken to the widow while with her. Elijah had not done this. God had done this through Elijah. The Word of the Lord must have its way. What the Lord says must happen.

And that same Lord speaks mercy to those who seek it. That same Lord speaks forgiveness to those who sorrow over their sins and seek a way out. The same Lord is faithful and just to absolve those who confess their transgressions. The same Lord has a back, that bearing the cross, was not unbroken by that last straw, is the same Shepherd who seeks and finds and places on His shoulders the lost sheep, even those who went one step too far. And the same Lord brings the spiritually dead to life still today, not that they should plunge right back into what killed them, but that they should walk in grace and newness of life. The Word of the Lord must have its way. Lord, let it have its way with us! The love of God in Christ surpasses all understanding. Lord, let us learn to know it in a compelling and meaningful way!

"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."