

EPISTLE LESSON, FROM THE 1ST CHAPTER OF 1 CORINTHIANS

You know what time of year it is, right? Playoff time, and the Super Bowl awaits. As we've watched those games, and plan for next week, one thing is certain. Bowls of chips and nachos and popcorn and M&M's, and all of kinds of good things will be eaten.

And you know that when you enjoy them, you will instinctively, by nature, reach for the big chips, the fluffy popped popcorn, the whole GREEN M&M's. No one reaches to the bottom of the bowl, the bag, to eat the broken flakes of chips; the half-popped, those hard unpopped kernels of popcorn; the little pieces of M&M shell that seem to break off. And no one in their right minds eats the raisins in the trial mix first. You know I'm right on this.

In our reading today, Paul teaches us that God does things differently than we poor, miserable sinners. When God chose His children He did not reach into the bowl and grab the big pieces first. Rather, God reached past the big pieces to the broken pieces and half-popped kernels. Paul says it this way,

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (vv. 26-29).

REJOICE AND BE GLAD, MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST,
GOD CHOSE POOR, MISERABLE SINNERS LIKE YOU AND ME TO BE
HIS CHILDREN AND HEIRS.

In light of Paul's words, I invite you to take a look at yourself. What are you? Who are you? A husband, father, grandfather? Wife, mother, grandmother? Student, farmer, coal miner, retired?

There is one thing that we all are -- sinners!

Have you ever seen a chicken run with its head chopped off around after its head has been chopped off? [I'm not trying to spoil your appetite for lunch, especially if you're having chicken]. That chicken looks alive. But dead in sin, we are like a chicken with its head chopped off – we think we are alive. We pretend we are alive, and try to convince ourselves that we can make ourselves right with God by our works, we can make ourselves "better Christians" with our works.

The whole history of mankind is the history of thinking we know more than God, the story of rejecting the Savior.

The Israelites of the Old Testament coveted the life of their pagan neighbors and did not live by God's will. The Pharisees of Jesus' day did not think of themselves as being sick with sin and therefore had no need for the Great Physician of body and soul. The Romans of the Apostles' day thought they were so smart they had no time for these trouble-making Christians. The church leaders of Dr. Luther's day had no need of a Savior -- they thought they could buy their way into heaven.

What of our day? We are so smart we can build a space ship. We have our smart phones, the internet now with AI. But, if we are so smart, where is the cure for sin and its wages of death?

Dead in sin, we are not wise, mighty, nor noble before God. We are helpless to save ourselves. So, God, who loved us and knew our helplessness, chose us in Christ Jesus.

We rejoice in this glad Epiphany season that God appeared to us in Jesus of Nazareth to announce God's favor and pardon for us poor sinners. Our Gospel lesson, the Beatitudes as they are commonly known, are not a new set of Commandments that we are to live by. Christ is announcing to us how blessed we are in Him. The Beatitudes describe us in our relationship to God through the Savior Jesus Christ.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This poverty that Jesus talks about is not a lack of earthly wealth and comforts, but to see that our sin has made us beggars before God. Like the Syrophenician woman, we beg for even the crumbs of grace from the Master's table. Jesus Himself taught us what it meant to be poor in spirit in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. While the Pharisee told God how great he was and expected God's reward, the Tax Collector merely prayed: *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner"* (Ge 18:13).

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." We mourn sin and its wages of death. But, Jesus comforts us with His words: *"Son (Daughter), be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you"* (Matt 9:2).

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." To be meek before God means to have patient trust in God and His good and gracious will, even though the wind and waves are storming all around us. The Apostle Paul teaches us what it means to be meek before God. He tells us that to keep him from being conceited, he was given a thorn in the flesh to torment him. *"Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me,"* Paul writes. *"But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"* Then Paul concludes, *"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me"* (2 Cor 12:8-9).

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." The desire of the human heart is to be right with God. The Law teaches us that we are sinful and not right with God. So, we look to Christ to be our righteousness. St. Paul teaches us: *For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Gal 2:27)*. At our baptism, we put on Christ, so that His righteousness and purity cover over our sin. God looks at us and does not see our sin, but the righteousness of His only Son Jesus, with whom He is well pleased. And, God is well pleased with us.

In our collect for today, we pray: "Almighty God, because you know that we are set among so many and great dangers that by reason of the weakness of our fallen nature we cannot always stand upright, grant us your strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptation." Walking by faith in this vale of tears, we are assailed by many dangers. This sinful world, the devil, and our own flesh would have us hate Christ and abandon His Kingdom. They would have us believe that it is better to live for the moment, for the pleasures and treasures a dying world offers. By ourselves, we have no power, ability, nor even the desire to love God and do His will, walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. So, it is that our Loving Lord comes to us through His Word and His own Body and Blood to preserve us in the faith He began at our baptism. In the midst of our battles with the evil foe, what comfort it is to remember that hell itself cannot overcome Christ nor those united to Him by faith. We are chosen by God. Try as He might, the evil foe cannot take us from Christ nor rob us of everlasting life in heaven.

Epiphany. God has appeared to us in Christ. Now, My Dear Friends, He appears to this world through you and me. Last week, we

observed the Conversion of St. Paul. God made the persecutor of Christians an Apostle, to bring the light of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

I invite you to take a look at yourself, in view of your baptism. What are you? You are the light of the world. God shines His Epiphany light to this sin-darkened world through you. Peter says it this way,

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pe 2:9).

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.