Taken together, the Collect and readings for today paint a complex picture of the Church and our place in it, and our place in the world. The Collect reminds us that God has done for us something we cannot do for ourselves: forgiven our sins—and done so in a startling way—by self-sacrifice.

The propers for today—that opening prayer and the readings from scripture—pose a balance of self-sufficiency and dependence on something outside of ourselves.

Maybe self-sufficiency overstates the case. It’s more like individual and communal responsibility for ourselves. Accountability may be even closer to the mark.

The Collect juxtaposes Christ as an unparalleled sacrifice for our sins and Jesus as an example for us to follow.

“Sacrifice for our sins” always been a challenging concept for me—on many counts. There’s that whole business of God’s sacrificing his son. I’m simply not buying that as an image of a loving Father nor a loving God. The *only* way I can view atonement is as Jesus (God incarnate) sacrificing himself to show us that love is a more potent force than anything else, including the cruelty of human beings bent on maintaining control and power over others at all costs. That sacrifice speaks loudly to us, reassuring us that we are not condemned to live out our basest instincts, even when we are threatened by all the evil this world can throw at us, even death.

So . . . yes . . . sacrifice for us, saving us from giving up or giving in when expedience or face-saving or greed or depression has pulled us away from the right path. Just when we’re ready to say, “What’s the use? I’ve done my best (most of the time), and now I’ve succumbed to those pressures and done the wrong thing. I’m just no good . . .” At that point (as well as others) we’re pulled back from the brink by a God whose love knows no bounds.

You know the feeling I’m talking about—that lifting of the heaviness that threatens to crush us, that lifting that comes through no effort of our own. Sure, sometimes it comes in the wake of our praying fervently, but sometimes it just comes mysteriously, despite our doubting, despairing selves. ***That***, I believe, is the action of a self-sacrificing God who knows us inside out.

We speak of God as omniscient—all-knowing—and often think of that as knowing all the mysteries of the cosmos—from farthest outer space, which lies beyond our ability to see our imagine, to the most minute microcosm of subatomic particles tinier than anything we can see or imagine. And it seems to me that it’s a pretty decent way of conceptualizing omniscience.

But perhaps the most amazing aspect of God’s omniscience is the divine knowledge of us—our fears and aspirations, our hopes and doubts—individually and collectively. Maybe those moments of relief from all that assails us, both outer events and inner turmoil—are moments of felt connection with this self-giving, self-*sacrificing* God.

It may sound like I’m reducing faith to a matter of feelings. And truth be told I tend in that direction. However, God’s will, God’s protective and loving power, is always present, whether we *feel* it or not. At least that’s what I believe.

Before I got into all that I was talking about a balance between self-sufficiency (being responsible for our own actions) and this cosmic, saving, compassionate grace of God. The Collect speaks of Jesus as example as well as sacrifice. *That’s* where we bring our own paltry force of will into play. The passages from Proverbs and Ephesians speak of wisdom and maturity—turning from foolishness in order to follow daily in Christ’s footsteps. That’s when we employ the brains and guts God has given us to make tough decisions and take right actions, even when our pride and desire for the easy way out would pull us in other directions.

None of this is merely about each of us as an individual. It’s about all of us together, in our church, in our society, in our political life, in our world. It’s about how we treat each other globally as well as in every single one-on-one interaction. Of course it does also involve each of us looking inward, taking quiet time to reflect on our actions.

Here’s what it is, in short: impossible! Juggling all of this all the time, every day with every person we meet, in every decision we make. It’s impossible and exhausting.

And that’s why the most important word in the Collect just might be . . . “grace.” “Give us *grace*,” we pray, “to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow in the blessed steps of his most holy life.”

That’s why Jesus told his disciples that the grace and love and guidance of God are more like taking food into our bodies than like memorizing and following rules and regulations and theories taken down from a chalkboard.

We are to accept as fact that God has done and is doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And we are to use the strength—mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional—to follow the way in which God leads us.

For all of this—these gifts of grace and strength—our only faithful response is to live our lives with grateful hearts.

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