

Last Sunday Father Ian began his sermon with a word, and his word was “growth.” This week I will also start my sermon with a word, and my word is “supererogation.” Now, “growth” is a word that we hear in ordinary everyday conversation, but you if you think that “supererogation” is a word that only professors tend to use...you are right! In fact, even professors don’t like it very much. I once read a book of essays on supererogation, and the editor began his introduction by saying that he disliked the word because it was ugly and hard to pronounce. But if “super-ero-gation” is hard to pronounce, it is easy to understand: “supererogation” means doing *more* than you have to do; it means *exceeding* your moral obligations; or in the familiar phase we know from military honors, it means “going *above and beyond* the call of duty.” So if you do more than you have to do, if you exceed your obligations, and if you go above and beyond the call of duty, then those actions are considered supererogatory.

But if the *meaning* of “supererogation” is easy to understand, it is surprisingly controversial in both moral and religious contexts. The problem is simple, and two-fold: first, how do we know what our moral duties and religious obligations are, and second, is it ever really possible to exceed them? Knowing what our moral duties and religious obligations are is a difficult issue in its own right, but since we are Christians let’s make things easy for ourselves here and just assume the two Great Commandments, which we often call the Summary of the Law. In fact, we heard them a few moments ago in the Gospel reading from Luke: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” So those are the two main Christian duties and obligations: to love God with everything we have, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Easy, right?

Well, then, the next question is, can we in fact do *more* than fulfill these two great commandments? Can we exceed them? Can we go above and beyond them? That is, can we ever say that we have performed an act of supererogation here? When it comes to the *first* Great Commandment, the answer seems to be pretty clearly NO. If we do love God with ALL our heart, and with ALL our soul, and with ALL our strength, and with ALL our mind, then there is simply no way that we can do *more* than what we are commanded to do. This first command is so total, so demanding, so extreme, that it is impossible to exceed, because you can’t do more than ALL. There is nothing extra, nothing left over, nothing higher to reach. Indeed, most people would admit that, not only can we not *exceed* this command, we can’t even truly *fulfill* it. We can *try* to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, we can *strive mightily* to do our best here, but we can never actually succeed in fulfilling this commandment, let alone go above and beyond it. So we can safely rule out supererogation with the first Great Commandment. It’s just not possible.

So what about the second Great Commandment, what about loving our neighbor as ourselves? Can we do *more* than fulfill this commandment? Can we at least perform acts of supererogation *here*? This is where things get complicated. In ordinary, everyday life, even if people don't *use* the word "supererogation," it is still a necessary concept that we all intuitively understand and rely upon. Without supererogation we cannot be generous with our time and money—for example, we cannot make charitable donations or volunteer at the local soup kitchen—or even just do someone a favor, because if supererogation is impossible here then these things are not in fact optional for us but required. That is, we *have* to do them, in which case the donations are not "generous" and the work is not "volunteer" and the act is not a "favor," but obligatory. Our ordinary, everyday moral lives thus depend on us having a clear sense of what we *ought* to do, and what is good but *not* required of us, and our whole sense of what it means to be a good person is someone who in fact does *more* than what they *have* to do. So the real question we are asking here is whether the second Great Commandment about "loving our neighbor as ourselves" fits into this ordinary, everyday moral understanding or whether it goes beyond it somehow. And as I said, this question is complicated.

To understand how complicated this is, I have to confess that up until now I've been withholding two crucial pieces of information from you. The first is that, believe it or not, the English word "supererogation" actually comes from the parable of the Good Samaritan that we heard today in our Gospel reading from Luke. More specifically, it comes from the 4<sup>th</sup> century Latin translation, and it's in the phrase that the Samaritan tells the innkeeper, "I will repay you *whatever more* you spend." You know the story. The priest and Levite both pass by the beaten and robbed man, but the Samaritan stops and helps him. The Samaritan then takes him to an inn and after tending him further leaves him with the innkeeper with some money and the promise I mentioned a moment ago: he says, "when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." And all this, Jesus says to the lawyer, is what it means to be a neighbor.

But here's where it gets complicated: while the Samaritan clearly acts as a neighbor to the beaten and robbed man, and thus admirably fulfills the Second Great Commandment of loving his neighbor as himself, and is praised by Jesus for it, it is possible that *none* of what the Samaritan does for the man is actually supererogatory. That is, it is entirely possible that *everything* the Samaritan does here is in fact morally required of *him*, given his ethical and religious commitments. And this is partly because—surprisingly enough—the English word "supererogation" comes not from what the Good Samaritan does, but from what he tells the *innkeeper* to do. The Samaritan gives the innkeeper a certain amount of money to take care of the

injured man, and tells him that if the innkeeper's expenses *exceed* that amount, then he will reimburse him when he returns. So it is the innkeeper in the parable who would perform an act of supererogation in doing more than he was paid to do, at least up front. And again this is where the word itself comes from.

The second crucial piece of information that I have been withholding from you until now is that the whole topic of saints and sainthood that I will be presenting on this month involves this controversial concept of supererogation. When New Testament writers talk about "saints" they mean any and all Christians whatsoever, not some special, select, elite group. So when we heard a few moments ago in our epistle reading that Paul gives thanks for the love that the Colossians have "for all the saints," and that the Colossians "share in the inheritance of the saints in the light," this means *all* members of the Church. In this basic New Testament sense, we are *all* saints. The word "saint" simply means "holy," and only later did it gradually come to be applied to individuals whose holiness appeared to be greater than normal and who were therefore venerated for it. That is, "saints" in the way we now use the term are indeed thought to have far exceeded their ethical and religious obligations, and this is how the Roman Catholic Church understands them, as supererogatory individuals. But in the Anglican tradition, this Catholic understanding was explicitly rejected at the time of the Reformation, and believe it or not in the 39 Articles of the Church of England, there is one entirely devoted to the topic of supererogation, Article 14. I won't read it now, but it is on page 870 of The Book of Common Prayer, and it says that even *believing* that supererogation is possible is arrogant and offensive to God. *Whew!*

So where does this leave us? We've seen that supererogation is just impossible for the first Great Commandment, and that is controversial for the Second Great Commandment, but that it is an essential part of ordinary everyday morality. And yet if we are Christians we are indeed called and commanded to love God with everything we have and to love our neighbors as ourselves. So consider our Collect for today. It prays: "O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they *ought* to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to *accomplish* them, through Jesus Christ our Lord..." Supererogation may or may not be possible, and may or may not be arrogant and offensive to God, and may or may not be what makes those we call saints to be saints, but please note that this collect doesn't pray that we do *more* than we ought to do. Instead, it asks only that we may *know* what we ought to do and that God will give us the grace and power to actually *do* it. Maybe saints are called to do more than the rest of us, and maybe *we* need to be open to God calling us to do more than we are currently doing—that is, to be more like the saints. But at least doing what we *know* we *ought* to do is enough to keep us busy, so let's start there. Amen.