

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost
10 September 2017

Scripture readings:

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalms 149

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

As we read these lessons today it occurs to me that there is very good reason that Christians are misunderstood because there seem to be such a bunch of conflicting encouragements and lessons and instructions in these three lessons, and let's not forget the psalm. We began the day with the collect which usually sets the tone or the theme for the day. *"Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy."* I'm glad that prayer was there today because I started today as usual looking for the pope but you know he's in Columbia now so he's in our time zone - so it wasn't noon and they didn't bother to broadcast anything else from Rome at noon so I missed my buddy.

I flipped through the channels and there was somebody else by the name of Bobby Schuller. Not many months ago he was preaching in a suit. Now he's wearing doctoral robes, but he didn't impress me this morning. He was apparently taking the tact of a predecessor even of his father by the name of Norman Vincent Peale - the Power of Positive Thinking. He was trying to convince his congregation and those of us who were watching from this distance away that if you only have positive thoughts everything else will work out just fine, and if things aren't working out really well for you it's because you're thinking bad or your thoughts aren't positive enough. It's not easy. It's also impossible. My question of him - and of course you're not close enough to ask, so I'll ask it of you: *Where in that thinking is the power of God's grace? Where in that thinking is that when we regard any of our accomplishments that we understand those to be a gift from God? And where in that thinking is the idea that when things are really bad - and they are bad sometimes for you and for me - where in that kind of thinking is the understanding that even when things are really messed up, God is with us in the mess?*

I'm sorry. It's not my idea of Christianity. Now, do I think having a positive thought is a good idea? You're welcome to it, but don't run the risk of thinking that that's your good fortune. All people have to do is think positively in Florida and everything will be all right. It just doesn't work that way.

And so we see this extraordinary record and explanation of the Passover meal which is fine, celebrating liberation and freedom, but then the death of all the firstborn male babies of the enemy doesn't seem very godly to me.

Then we regard Psalm 149 which starts with this wonderful shout of joy: *"Hallelujah! Sing to the Lord a new song; sing God's praise in the congregation of the faithful."* But by the time we get to the end of the psalm: *"To wreak vengeance on the nations..."* That means anybody who's not like us - on foreigners. *"To wreak vengeance on the nations, punishment on the peoples..."* - the non-believers - *"To bind their kings in chains and their nobles with links of iron; To inflict on them the judgment decreed; this is glory for all his faithful people. Hallelujah!"* That you mistreat your enemies.

Then we turn the page and get to Romans: *"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."* Guess where I hang my hat? And that's where I want you to hang your hat too - because we've had thousands of years of experience in punishing our enemies and it just doesn't work. And now that we know that we can push buttons and bomb the living daylights out of the other side of the world, we're smart enough to know that the world turns and atomic fallout gets us.

I think this is the importance of Jesus - that he comes and brings to religious ideas this radical understanding of God as the parent, the creator, the father, the mother of all people - including geeks and gooks and foreigners and enemies of us, strangers. Now that shouldn't have been radical to a religious community of Jesus' day. It was written in scripture on the first page: *"In the beginning God creates the heavens, the earth, and everybody in it, and God stands back from what she creates and says, 'As a mother I love you, all of you, because you are my children.'"*

You've known people who've not been very good looking and have said, *"That's a face only a mother could love."* I think if we're honest with ourselves, we know we are sinners that only God could love. And if we bother to be honest with others and our judgments and their difficulties and their sin, we can say, *"They are sinners that only God can love, and even though I can't, I am related to them because they are my brothers and sisters."* And what do they deserve from me?

You may know that my older brother is here at the moment from Florida. He and I for the seventy years that I've been alive have not agreed on much [laughter], but we know we're brothers, and when we knew the storm was coming I knew that they needed to be here with me. And I know the same thing of them when I'm in danger. My other brother the day James died came to my home and simply sat there. All the differences notwithstanding, we as human beings can sit and be together without killing each other. It is possible, and it transcends all differences. The reason we can do that is because we believe, teach and confess God as Creator. That doesn't require him to be a Christian or a Jew or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Hindu - but I bet if you ask anybody in any one of those categories whether or not God created the world, you would look hard to find somebody who would disagree with you. Can we please just begin there?

I think what becomes important for us as a Christian community is to remember what Jesus said, not what people have said about Jesus. In early ecumenical discussions in the neighborhood with other traditions one of the primary concerns of my colleague from the Assembly of God - whom I increasingly like - was that as long as we talk about Jesus, we're safe. I thought, "Fine!" I don't have to agree with what you say, but we can talk about Jesus. Let's not insist that we agree on what we think about Jesus, but it is possible, it seems to me, for us to agree on what Jesus says. It is very, very elemental, and it is so elemental it's radical. It is simply what scripture says on the first page. "*In the beginning God created everybody in the world who is not like you.*" In the beginning God created everybody in the world who disagrees with you, who is a different color from you, a different gender from you, comes from a different nationality than you do, lives in a different part of the world than you do, eats different kinds of food than you do, dresses differently than you do, speaks a different language than you do, spends a different kind of money, values his and her possessions differently. In the beginning God creates every last one of those people, and then we get the nerve, the absolutely brassy nerve to say God creates me also in this little body that I have, my gender, my color, my language, my culture, my identity, my nationality. It has nothing to do with thinking positively. It has to do with God's gift to me of myself. And God's gift to me of you and yourself. That's all Jesus says. God created us all and gives us to each other as brothers and sisters and as a divine gift.

So our religious job is simple, and you see how complicated it becomes very early in the life of the Church when we get to the Nicene Creed from about the year 325 when the whole second paragraph, which is longer than the first and third ones put together, talks about what it is the Church says about Jesus and little or nothing about what it is that Jesus says. What Jesus says is so radical that it cost him his life.

Remember he was born on a barn floor. Have you ever been in a barn with animals in it? You know what's on the floor. I recall being in an Amish barn. It was empty. I knew it was not being used. It was probably a part of a museum or something. I can't remember the specifics, but I do remember asking what the little zigzag pieces of metal hanging from wires over each stall were. It was explained to me that they were electrified and when the cattle hunched their backs when they relieved themselves, it would shock them so that they would keep their backs down and defecate and void their bladders into the trough to keep the barn floor clean. Ingenuity.

But the point I'm trying to make is that in terms of what we know and believe about Jesus and the traditions we create about Jesus, we know that God's desire is to enter this earth at its very lowest levels, and that's part of our joy because if God can come into the world on a barn floor God can find me somewhere in this mess. And that's God's desire - to find us on the crap of the floor of creation - and to love me and assure me that I am God's child, that I am forgiven and that I am the object of divine affection and as a believing Christian - not who has a set of beliefs about who Jesus was necessarily, but who affirms what Jesus said - that if God loves me that much, God absolutely has to love everybody else that much. That's a simple equation, folks. And so all of the religiosity business gets pretty much wiped aside in one fell swoop by Jesus, and we hear in Romans, "*Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*" That's our only religious task. Period. Not what we say about Jesus, not what we say about God, but what we say when we encounter each other.

And so it is on the board out in front of the church and on the back of your bulletin every Sunday is the mission statement of this congregation - that our job as Christian people here is to welcome any and every human being to participate with us in what it is we know to be true, and that is when we gather - you and I, all of us - men, women, rich, poor, black, white, yellow, red, purple, green, whatever our language, culture, country of origin - when we gather together in the Lord's name - this is probably the most important sentence in the lessons today, the last sentence of the gospel for today: "*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*" When we gather we believe, teach and confess that we are greater than the sum of our parts because when we come here and when we care

for each other, God is with us.

Now let me give a good, first-hand for instance. Eight o'clock mass today - close enough in history for us? Melvina was here. Wonderful. For those who don't know, Melvina's husband, Lee, died two weeks ago. She was right where she belonged. She was in the church before I got here. She set the altar. And at the end of the mass her glasses were against her cheek and filled with tears. She said, "*I'm not going to go to the coffee hour. I don't want to bring people down.*" Kurt, whose wife died a year ago, who never goes to coffee hour, knew it became his job to put his arm around her and go to coffee hour.

Now you can't tell me that God isn't present in those encounters. You can't convince me otherwise. And I know from my personal experience of each and every one of you that I have experienced that divine presence in our relationships, and I know that the wonders of God's presence are known and effected here not because anybody is right or wrong or this kind or another kind, but because we gather in his name and the sum is greater than the parts. And that goes beyond life and death because before Lee died he was a great part of that equation, and that doesn't disappear with death.

In a lot of Scandinavian churches the rail around the altar is a semi-circle. The explanation of that is when the congregation comes to receive the sacrament and kneels around the altar, that's only half of the church. The other half is the heavenly part of the circle.

So we have this gospel that Jesus brings to us. So you can say whatever you want to about what you believe about Jesus. I don't really care much. But I *do* care that when we gather we hear the words of Jesus about loving one another and daring to love the rest of the world because that's the only way we will get to know who God is in this place and in this time, and it has to do with laughing with each other, crying with each other, being with each other and opening our arms and homes to each other when the storms of life hit with unimaginable force because we believe what Jesus says - where two or three are gathered in his name, he is with us!

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