

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
11 October 2015

Scripture readings:

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 Psalm 90:12-17 Hebrews 4:12-16 Mark 10:17-31

Yesterday as I was tooling around enjoying the sight of the hillsides turning colors by the artistry of the Great Creator, I had on the BBC Radio and there was a discussion about a religious effort in England to prevent intermarriages. A very orthodox group of people made it their business to go around on the wedding day to interrupt and stop intermarriages.

My grandfather didn't go to his own son's wedding because he married a Catholic. I never saw him in church, but that didn't prevent him from making a misery out of his own son's wedding. It works both ways. I recalled it just a couple of weeks ago. I remember on the day my mother's mother was buried that same uncle was having an issue with my mother who was never really upset about anything, but I do remember what she said then: "*Would your priest have buried your mother today?*" Well, the answer, of course, was "*No.*" I don't hear the pope saying any of that stuff today. Do you? And I don't hear the gospel saying any of that stuff.

The questions are being raised with Jesus 2,000 years ago: "*How do I get myself into heaven?*" And Jesus says, "*Well, you want the rules. I'll give you the rules.*" And then he quotes the entire Decalogue virtually. "*Thou shalt not do this... Thou shalt not do this...*" And weren't you a little bit embarrassed when the young man says, "*I've obeyed all of them.*" Come on! With at least one disclaimer: "*since my youth.*" He allowed himself to get away with stuff when he was a really little kid. But he'd been really, really good. He's done all of the obedience of all of the rules and God owes him something for that, right? And Jesus says, "*Well, you lack one thing. Just one. You have too much junk. You have too many possessions. You haven't shared generously enough with those in need, even if you don't know them. So if you want to **earn** your way into heaven, sell all your junk and give that money to somebody else.*" Anybody want to be first in line? We're free to do it.

Jesus' point is you cannot save yourself. The example is used: It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a wealthy person to enter of his own ability, own activity, own righteousness - for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God. There is nobody in this room who is not among the wealthy. Now I don't care what your income is. I care that, by comparison with the rest of the world, we are the wealthy upper crust. It's just a fact.

A friend of mine, a seminary classmate of mine, died in 1988 - one of the very early AIDS deaths. John lived across the hall from me in seminary. I received from his possessions a beautiful woodcarving, about this big. I should have dug it out of the attic. A woodcarving, a bunch of arcades in blinds, arches with columns between them, and the arcade had in one a cross, in the other a star of David, and in the other a crescent moon with a star, indicating - at least to my eyes - a background of all of the great religious traditions of the world. And inside that blind arcade is a *huge* needle's eye, the kind of needle that we used in the 20th century. Well, you don't sew anymore, do you? *[laughter]* I do have a button that needs to go back on my trousers and I haven't gotten that done. You know how small those things are. But here is depicted in this wonderful woodcarving the eye of a needle large enough, not only for a camel, but a fat camel laden with saddlebags to jump through, and the camel is jumping through and laughing. It's a joke. It can't happen - unless the needle eye is wide enough.

And Jesus says, "*It's a joke! If you want to save yourself, it can't happen unless you believe that God can create a needle eye that large.*" And that's really, I think, all that Jesus is saying - that the grace of God, the entrance into God's kingdom, the opening for us to move in that direction, if we ever get the direction right. Do you ever wonder what you did without GPS? I use it to get back home! God opens the door, the way - big enough for us to get through, even laden with our saddlebags of junk and baggage. And it's God's opening, not our opening anything or deserving anything or our earning anything, that gets us into the kingdom of God. It's God's work for us.

And that brings us to what it is we do today. There are loads of ways of understanding baptism. You know the real one, don't you? A baby not baptized is going to hell! Got that one? Anybody ever hear that before? Hogwash! It's a way of frightening people into using baptism as a way to join a church. Join this club and not that club. Well, in Christianity baptism has always remained a sort of ecumenical sacrament. Was she baptized Catholic or Protestant? Neither - Christian! Baptism has always been recognized by all of the great Christian traditions as a universal sacrament. It doesn't even require a priest. Have you seen a deacon do a baptism? You've heard the stories of nurses at bedsides where children are born who are moribund and using their tears to baptize a child.

What is the importance of what it is we dare to do today? Certainly not to join a club. Certainly not to agree to a bunch of ideas, many of which need revision, many of which are out of date, and many of which do not lead to loving one another. Let's be honest. What we do today in this universal ecumenical sacrament is believe, teach and confess that God loves God's creation - all of it, whatever shape, size, age, color, gender and, as I was reminded at eight o'clock, even the guys who were asking the disturbing questions of Jesus were loved by Jesus. Even the problematic people, even our enemies, we believe, teach and confess are God's sons and daughters and, therefore, loved by God. That includes all of us - alcoholics, addicts, crooks, tax collectors, even priests, parents, rich, poor, young, old, male, female, Catholics and Protestants, maybe even Episcopalians [*laughter*] and the occasional Lutheran [*laughter*]. The point is: in the sacramental life of the Church we have often in the past and I think we need to prevent ourselves in the present from using these extraordinary, beautiful and simple expressions of God's love as expressions of either inclusion or exclusion in the life of this church or that church.

The point of the use of water, I suppose, is complex. Human life does not exist without water. Right? We bathe in water. Water gives us life. Water quenches thirst. Water is powerful. Water generates power. And water when spilled becomes this extraordinary image of what God's love is like.

You know the story of the prodigal son, don't you? Everybody thinks it's the bad guy, the young son who took his inheritance and squandered it. Well, the son who stayed home is really disgusting because when his brother came back and his father took care of him, he went out in the back yard and cried because his younger brother was getting more than he might. And God was the prodigal in that story. God was the one who wasted his love on both of his boys, neither of whom deserved it because one was self-righteous and the other wasn't. Neither earned his father's love. Both of them had it from the beginning.

And that's what baptism is about: a simple expression that these children, individuals called by name, are the recipients of God's love, and not just through the sacramental act of pouring water on them, but through the daily sacramental act of their parents, their family, their friends, and - God please - the Church taking responsibility for young minds and saying, "*You will know God's love because we will communicate that to you as we change your dirty diaper, as we give you the aspirin to bring down your temperature, as we feed you when you're hungry, as we protect you from danger, as we educate you, as we love you into responsible and beautiful adulthood.*" That's what baptism is. These kids, it seems to me, can sing and play and enjoy themselves, and that's a part of our worship. These kids bring more to the Church at this point than the Church gives to them. We're simply affirming that the love of God is here to share all the time. They're reminding us how and where to share it and with whom to share it.

And so we gather as a Christian community in this neighborhood here today to say these children who are neighbors, who live in our community, who are traditionally through their families, through their friends, through their community, connected to the love of God through these gorgeous traditions of the Church receive, not from me, not from the Episcopal Church, not from the Lutheran Church, not from any organization or denomination, but from the hands of God alone, the affirmation and assurance that they are God's children, they are loved by God, and that the door to the kingdom of heaven is open for them as much as it is for any other forgiven sinner in the world. So they are partners with us as we march toward the kingdom of God. They are partners with us as we create the kingdom of God right here and now by caring for them, by caring for each other, and by sharing the love of God which makes us all happy. Can you do better than that?!

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