

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The First Sunday in Lent  
14 February 2016

Scripture readings:

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Here we are at this interesting period, one of the two great penitential seasons in the life of the Church - the other one being the four weeks before Christmas - and these six or so weeks before Easter in which we're invited to reflect perhaps a little more seriously than usual on our condition as human beings. Even though we shifted gears yesterday to celebrate Easter at a funeral, it seems to me nothing is more poignant than a funeral to invite us to think about such things, and I don't think anybody here doesn't, about the human condition. What is this life all about? And the Great Litany attempts, I believe, quite seriously to say these are the situations we face throughout our lives as people, and there is no difficulty or success, there's no sorrow or joy which is outside or beyond the scope of a loving Creator God and that God's concern for us as people.

I did very clearly announce yesterday at the beginning of the funeral sermon that if people came here for simple answers to complex questions and a sort of Hallmark greeting card anodyne to the problem of death, they had come to the wrong place and I was the wrong person. I don't have those answers - not the way we'd like them. I suppose the challenge to us all the time is that life is for us to live through, to participate in, to find out about on the journey - that nobody sits back and has all the answers except, of course, that whom we call God. Consequently the first lesson today tells of how the people were instructed to make a sacrifice of the first fruits. You know how ridiculous that became, don't you? Well, how do you get an animal up to God? You have to burn it and the smoke goes up, and God really likes to smell burnt animal. *[laughter]* It is ridiculous! And there are those who think that God likes to smell incense, too. Frankly, I don't have as much problem with that as with burnt flesh. *[laughter]*

But what's that all about? And my question recently has been - you know I've been struggling with this one - what is it you think you can do to make God happy? Isn't she happy already? Isn't that what we're told? *In the beginning God creates the world, everyone in it, and God stands back and every day in creation looks at what God has made and says, "I like this! I love what I made!"* And that includes you and me and everybody else in the whole shootin' match!

But somewhere along the line religious organizations think that it's a good idea to make a sacrifice. Well, I'm not ready to can that idea, but I don't think the sacrifice benefits God. I think sacrifice in that ancient way and in the ways *we* understand it - tithing and all the rest of that to support the religious institution... The pope's really doing a good job in Mexico, isn't he, speaking of religious institutions. Taking on his cardinals, taking on the Mexican government and all that corruption. Isn't it good we don't have corrupt government here? *[laughter]* And

going to the border and saying, “*You have an imaginary line here, if you think it can be perforated. There’s no line here!*” Guess what? The ancestors of all those Mexicans were here before your ancestors got here. They *are* Americans. They are *North* Americans. This is their land. And it’s the land of all those people we’ve locked into dog cages called reservations.

And he’s taking on the drug cartels and he’s asking the Church, government, society and everybody else in the world to pay attention to the poor, the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the ignored, the little people with the message that it’s the job of “the big people” to see that power, influence, money, economies, governments see that there is a more even and just distribution of food, clothing, healthcare, protection, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

So back to the idea of sacrifice. I think the importance of the business of sacrifice is not so much that God likes to smell smoke and dead animals, but as a reminder to the people who are required to make the sacrifice that what they sacrifice, the first fruits, the best and most immediate results of their labors, is in fact God’s gift to them, not their gift to God. And the best, it seems to me, that we can do in the middle of excruciating grief yesterday was to ask all of the questions about this life that we pointed to in the Great Litany today but to insist that we ask all of the questions and among those questions are - and this is the one related to sacrifice - What have you been given? Whence the gift? Who the giver? Now all the questions are fair, but it seems to me those are *required*. You can ask all you want and should, but don’t forget those.

It was with the strength of the tradition, the strength of our faith, the strength of our worship that I could look into the face of Carol’s mother this morning and say, “*What would life have been without the forty years of her life?*” And it was her mother before Carol’s death who told me that when she became pregnant with Carol - and I think it may have been an unexpected pregnancy - her husband said to her, “*God wants us to have this child.*” So there was forty years of God’s gift. What would it have been without that gift? Who gave the gift? Where did the gift come from?

The thing we know about God’s delight with creation and God’s joy in us is that God makes this world in a way that we can only understand divine love as we mess around with human love in all of its imperfection, in all of its limitation, in all of its brevity, that where it is we encounter love in our relationships with each other that is where we find God’s love for us. And as we share that love with each other for however long or briefly there is a flicker, a thread, a glimpse of eternity because we do make a couple simple universal equations. God is love. God is eternal. Therefore, so is love. And we get it in amounts and quantities that we argue with and about - It wasn’t long enough. It wasn’t good enough. It wasn’t... But we get it and without it we know that physiologically without love we cannot live. We’ve often talked about the experiment that was done in England after the Second World War with two groups of babies. What were the primary needs for human existence? Warmth, food, cleanliness. But one group of babies was rocked, talked to, and loved, and the others were allowed to lie in their cribs. The experiment was stopped. Love was required, primary, necessary for life.

And so on our journey we’re given opportunities left, right and center to experience the presence of God in our encounters with each other, and it is that which brings us to grief

because... I remember yesterday going right over here and almost leaning on the coffin and saying, "*When those we love die we fear that God has died also, and to some degree God's expression of God's love through that person has.*" But we are forced by the tradition to offer the first fruits. We are forced to say that the love we had came from God, not from us. It was God's gift to us. We are forced to say that, and then we are forced as we are forced at every Eucharist to say, "*It is a good, a right, and a holy thing - and this is the best of the tradition - that we should at all times in all places and under all circumstances offer first fruits of thanks to you O Lord Almighty God.*" Now why? Because in our imperfection, in our limitations, in our inability to understand and even our inability to believe, we are forced to acknowledge that we are not on this journey alone and that what we celebrated at Christmas in the baby in Bethlehem whose name is God-with-us, Emmanuel, that that is our faith.

Not just in the person of Jesus, but certainly in the Body of Christ which is right here and right now.

And so we take these forty days of Lent to reflect about who it is we are not, who it is we are, who it is God is, and let's reflect on who it is God is not. That's important because we like to think that God is an American. We really do. You've seen the bumper sticker - "*God bless America.*" And I'm convinced that those stickers have another half that's cut off, an attitudinal half, and it's "*God damn the rest of the world.*"

And so Lent is a time for us to allow our images of God to expand, to take us to places we can't imagine, to open our hearts and hands and spirits to love those we find repulsive, to love those of whom we are afraid, to love those we are taught are our enemies, and to believe that when we run the risk of a relationship and offer that as a first fruit we can find God's gift in places we never imagined.

Forty days to do that is probably not long enough. We'll probably have to spend the rest of our lives in that effort, but it's not a bad length of time for us to get going with it, and on this journey we know that we will arrive eventually at Easter and the celebration of a resurrection to new and eternal life which begins now and starts with us and which is also God's gift to us.

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