

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Fifth Sunday After The Epiphany
5 February 2017

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalms 112:1-10

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Matthew 5:13-20

The one thing we do know in the proclamation of the gospel which is a part of what it is we do here every week, that what my job is at this point is to share and proclaim good news, and I think we have been building up to extraordinary good news with all of the information that preceded the liturgy today. Because we are people who are bound by time and space and blessed with memory, we can recall and remember what has happened. We are not creatures who are condemned to repeat the errors of the past unless we don't study it. We are people of faith who believe that no matter how difficult or daunting the oppositions to truth may seem, that God is with us.

You remember last week I shared with you my frustration with the Beatitudes, that I think they're a bad ad for good religion. "*Blessed are you when all of these troublesome things are yours.*" Well, that's because I was using what I call a Mary Kay Cosmetic approach to religion which says if you sell enough mascara you get a pink Cadillac, and that doesn't look like mascara very much or anything good for me, and what's the payoff? You might remember my saying I have trouble with the kind of theology that says, "*It doesn't matter what they do to you now. You'll get paid off in the end when you go to heaven.*" That was used terribly and miserably during slavery, wasn't it? And even bought as an idea by the slaves themselves. Of course not that they had much choice about that.

But then I came to understand that what the Beatitudes might mean is that God is with us no matter what our situation in life. That is our hope. That is our joy. That is our good news. No matter how bad things get, that is not proof that God is absent. No matter how challenging the situation may be, no matter how much guts it may take to speak the truth, no matter how much effort it might involve for us to advocate for justice, God is with us and in this world.

It fascinates me that Jesus is putting a sort of plank in new religion in the gospel today when he says, "*Don't think that because you're waking up to a new idea about me and the gospel that this negates the law.*" He's pretty straightforward about that. Uncomfortably so, for me because I'd rather just get rid of it. Wouldn't you?

"Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

We're coming up in October to the 500th anniversary celebration of the Lutheran Reformation. On the 31st of October, 1517, the eve of All Saints, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses for Discussion and Argument in the Church on the Castle Church door at Wittenberg. Lutherans for a long time have had a very clear theological position on works righteousness, and I think much of Christianity shares that idea. It's not particularly Lutheran but it's one of the things that Lutherans "get" and they get it good - that there's not a blessed thing you can *do*, not even if you obey the law better than the scribes and Pharisees, that will merit for you admission into heaven - that your salvation, your righteousness, your ticket to heaven is God's gift to you - not because you deserve it, earn it, or do anything better than anybody else - just because God loves you because you're one of his rotten children.

God is a very profligate parent. We see that illustrated most beautifully in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We also see in that parable the jealous son who stays at home, the disgusting Little Goody-Two-Shoes who sucks up to daddy all the time and expects better treatment because he didn't go off the rails. Well, he went off the rails spiritually, emotionally and otherwise, didn't he? In between those two characters we can find ourselves as Christian people - one or the other. Neither one is great. That parable isn't about the kids; it's about God! It's not about the prodigal son; it's about the profligate father. Oh, let's give it a shot: a profligate mother!

They were kids only a mother could love! [laughter]

But in understanding the love of God, Jesus in the gospel today says, “*You know, the law from God comes as a matter of love.*” The law is a way for us to organize ourselves in our relationships. It teaches us to respect each other even when we don’t feel like it. It teaches us to respect each other’s property. It teaches us to understand that the source and generator of all that it is we have and are comes from God. And so he’s very, very careful not to say with the new theology, the new testament, with Christianity, that all that went before is eradicated. “*Unless you do this better than the scribes and Pharisees...*” And you’d better believe, friends, they did it well. I think they get short shrift by us 2,000 years later when we fail to realize what good church people they were. They did it. They taught Sunday School, they sat on the church council, they were vestry members, they were officers in the congregation, they cleaned, they were tithers, they did it all right! And they were sure that because they did it right that God would do it right. They had it backwards.

But it didn’t mean it negated the law. And so at the time of the Reformation there was discussion: What’s the role of the law in Christianity since we came to understand at the time of the Reformation that a Christian is a slave of none and a completely free person who is thereby a slave to all and entirely enslaved in service to others because she and he understand their role as forgiven by God and made righteous by God, by God’s activity. So Lutherans get all excited about this business of works righteousness. But there’s nothing wrong, dear Lutheran friends - for those of you who might be here - there’s nothing wrong in doing something good. You’re not prevented from doing good works. In fact you’re encouraged to do them, please. But don’t use them as your modicum of exchange for divine love which is yours already. That’s the point.

And so it is the good news I think we get full-blast - double-barreled good news today - comes from way before Christianity, from this text in Isaiah which is remarkable and lovely. And what you must remember, friends: this is a liturgical church. I do not pick the lessons. This was picked years ago for today - but does the shoe fit! And a pretty lovely pair of shoes, too. I think there are two of them here!

“*Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.*” That’s what I think the joy of keeping the law is, because the law will do this for you. At the time of the Reformation what are the uses of the law? One of them was to organize civil government and human relationships. The other use of the law was to condemn. If we read the law honestly and what it says, we will find - all of us - that we fall short. The law is there to help us come to a confession that I am by nature sinful and unclean and cannot obey that law and cannot redeem myself, period. So here in Isaiah where the law was surely understood and applied, the prophet says, “*Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.*” They’re not really obeying the law. They’re getting around it. They’re playing games with it. “*Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness...*” They’re acting as if they’re obeying. They want from me a kind of religion which will respect them as law-abiding and they’re not. “*...and did not forsake the ordinance of God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.*”

You know, one of the most profound poems I have ever read is called *In Westminster Abbey* by a wonderful English poet, Sir John Betjeman. He talks about a very high-class lovely British lady who betakes herself to Westminster Abbey and removes her gloves and says her prayers during wartime. She asks God to make sure that the bombs don’t fall on her but just on the Germans, etc. And then she concludes her prayers, “*If something does happen to us in England, please make sure it doesn’t happen on Cadogan Square*” where she lives. And then she’s in a hurry and she has to put on her gloves and leave because she’s got a lunch with the ladies.

So much of our prayer life and our relationship to God is like this. Hypocrisy isn’t anything new to people of faith. We’re experts at it, and we condemn ourselves with it. That sounds like terrible news and it is, but that’s not where the news ends. We have a loving God who, when we ask obnoxious questions like, “*Well, we’re fasting, but you’re not paying up.*” Big deal! So I didn’t eat meat on Friday - Whoopee! That’s a big sacrifice, isn’t it? I had a kid in my first parish - this is a great sacrifice - he did give up pizza during Lent. Imagine that! [laughter]

“Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.” Then God asks the question: *“What is it I require of you? Is it to bow your head, to lie in sackcloth and ashes, to fast? That’s not what I want,”* God says. This is what God wants from us because God loves us - not because it will *make* God love us, but because we believe, teach and confess that God *does* love us. This is what acknowledging to the world God’s love for us will look like - are you ready? *“To loose the bonds of injustice”* - that means to advocate for justice - *“to undo the thongs of the yoke”* - not to create them - *“to let the oppressed go free”* - that’s the oppressed, not the oppressor - *“and to break every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin.”* Now I’m not sure exactly what that means, but it does make me think of my sister. *“Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly.”*

You know what our job is as Christians. It is not to be afraid. It is not to be comfortable. It is not to hide from the realities of the world but to do these things. *“Your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then when you have done these things, you shall call and the Lord will answer.”*

Now why would God answer them? Because the answer is, friends, in those people. The answer is in those who are mistreated. The answer is in the poor, in the homeless. That’s where God is in part to be found. *“Then the Lord will answer. You shall cry for help, and I will say, ‘Here I am.’”*

There is a poem by Martin Niemoeller that has to do with Germany during the Second World War. *“They came for this one, and I said nothing. They came for the gay person, and I said nothing. They came for the gypsy, and I said nothing. They came for the physically disabled, and I said nothing. They came for the Jew, and I said nothing. And then they came for me, and there was nobody to say anything.”*

“Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you,” - now get this. I didn’t pick this lesson, but here it is - *“the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”*

There is good news here. There is terribly, exquisitely good news here, and we have it and it is ours to share, and woe to us if we don’t! *“The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden.”* Amen.

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

In Westminster Abbey

Let me take this other glove off
As the vox humana swells,
And the beauteous fields of Eden
Bask beneath the Abbey bells.
Here, where England’s statesmen lie,
Listen to a lady’s cry.

Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans,
Spare their women for Thy Sake,
And if that is not too easy
We will pardon Thy Mistake.
But, gracious Lord, whate’er shall be,
Don’t let anyone bomb me.

Keep our Empire undismembered,
Guide our Forces by Thy Hand,
Gallant blacks from far Jamaica,
Honduras and Togoland;
Protect them Lord in all their fights,
And, even more, protect the whites.

Think of what our Nation stands for,
Books from Boots' and country lanes,
Free speech, free passes, class distinction,
Democracy and proper drains.
Lord, put beneath Thy special care
One-eighty-nine Cadogan Square.

Although dear Lord I am a sinner,
I have done no major crime;
Now I'll come to Evening Service
Whensoever I have the time.
So, Lord, reserve for me a crown,
And do not let my shares go down.

I will labour for Thy Kingdom,
Help our lads to win the war,
Send white feathers to the cowards,
Join the Women's Army Corps,
Then wash the steps around Thy Throne
In the Eternal Safety Zone.

Now I feel a little better,
What a treat to hear Thy Word,
Where the bones of leading statesmen
Have so often been interr'd.
And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait
Because I have a luncheon date.

Sir John Betjeman