

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
11 March 2018

Scripture readings:

Numbers 21:4-9  
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22  
Ephesians 2:1-10  
John 3:14-21

Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent which is known in England as Mothering Sunday, a Sunday of refreshment. You may remember back in the day when Sundays were known by the Latin name of the first word of the Introit. This would have been *Laetare Sunday - Rejoice and be glad*, the piece of the Psalm that was used for that part of the liturgy. The same thing happens in the third Sunday in Advent when the vestments turn from violet, the traditional color in penitential seasons, to pink. On the third Sunday in Advent and the fourth Sunday in Lent, instead of violet, the priest gets to wear pink. There are parishes that are very wealthy or very, very diligent about things liturgical that will have pink vestments that are used twice a year.

The point being that in the middle of a penitential season, there's a Sunday of refreshment. During Lent many people refrain from eating rich foods, but on Mothering Sunday you take the finest flour available and you make your mother a special cake with currants in it.

It's a day that is probably partly responsible for the birth of the idea of Mother's Day in our country, which is another completely different mess about which we'll talk probably when we get near it in May.

But more important than all of that liturgical stuff and history - which is kind of fun if you're interested in the Church Calendar - is the emphasis today on Jesus as the Bread of Life and particularly on understanding a theologically radical ideas of two thousand years ago, five hundred years ago, and today. In the epistle lesson we read these extraordinary words which contain an absolutely radical idea about God's love: *God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even though we were dead through our trespasses...* While we were still sinners, we merited and received and continue to receive God's love without deserving it.

Now we read over these words quickly, and they go by and we say, "*Oh yes, we agree with that.*" But do you know what that does to most religious systems? If you say to people, God loves you even though you don't tithe, even though you don't go to church, even though you weren't baptized or confirmed or married and you have kids - that God's love is there for you without your having to do anything for it. Without having to earn it or deserve it, God's fully effective love is there for you, and if you're willing to believe that, then by extension, for everybody else. If you're really honest and you say, "*If God can love me that much...*" If you're really honest, then you have to say, "*Well, God has to love everybody else before he got to me because I'm the worst of the bunch!*" That's what's called self analysis, self reflection. In twelve-step programs it's called taking an inventory of yourself. In Lent we call it a penitential season. In the liturgy we call it a rite for confession, and, as you know, you'll never find anywhere in the liturgies of the Church a rite for confession which does not include a rite for absolution. There is no room in the Church just to be guilty. That's psychologically sick. In the Church there is always a rite for absolution connected to rites for confession, and that is the business of being healthy and believing that God's love is there for us even before we get around to saying, "*Now wait. I've got a problem which I need to avert to return to health.*"

Now that's problematic to religious organizations that want to sell you something and scare the living bejabbers out of you so that you can get into heaven. You may remember a week or two ago Jesus was in the temple and was profoundly upset that the moneychangers were in there giving the impression that you could buy an animal which you could slaughter to make God happy and to forgive your sins. Well, that's nuts, isn't it? Is it just as nuts - or even nuts-er - if we come up as Christians with a very popular idea - and we're all guilty of it at some time or another - that Jesus is then sacrificed for our sins. So we make a jackass out of Jesus and sacrifice **him!** It's the same cockamamy screwed up idea. Think of it.

You remember Abraham took his son Isaac out to sacrifice him and received a profound divine, "*No, you don't! No, you don't!*" And you remember that I have this deep personal suspicion that in ancient cultures the sacrifice of the first-born male was ordinary for whatever reason exists in the human psyche, and then somewhere

along the line somebody got a bright idea: *“If we take these kids and mutilate them, make them scream and bleed by circumcision, we’ve done enough and we don’t have to kill them.”* It’s an option to think about. Just saying, as they say.

And then we get this extraordinary clarity from the writer of Ephesians about God’s grace and God’s love belonging to people long before they think they deserve it - maybe belonging to people because they **need** it. Now that’s an option.

Talking about the immeasurable riches of God’s grace and kindness shown to us in the best way possible in the person of Jesus. So then God kills Jesus for our sins. It’s nuts! And it’s very popular.

So here it is - Lent, Mothering Sunday. Let’s ask one pertinent question. Why, then, did Jesus die? Why was he killed? Why was he crucified? Or, if you need to use the word - sacrificed? Well, I’m at the point in my life where I’m not willing to say anymore that God did that for my sin. Did that offend anybody? Are we willing to man-up and woman-up and say that Jesus died because people - religious people primarily - were ignorant and frightened and could not bring themselves to believe that God loved their enemies and themselves sufficiently and that God was pleased with them and that they had to make everybody think and believe and act the same way they did, so they killed him. They were orthodox, straight believing. They were clean, kosher. They were correct, righteous, and Jesus wasn’t. He plucked grain on the Sabbath. Oh, I’m telling! *[laughter]* He spent time with tax collectors, sinners, whores, gutter women, widows, lepers, crud-bums throughout the world, the crazy, the crippled. And that’s where he spent his time because he had this extraordinary idea that all of those sinful people were God’s children and were loved by God - even though they were dead wrong and weren’t religious. They were crooks and gangsters and all the rest of it. But he, Jesus, could not be convinced that even they - or maybe *especially* they - were not entitled to good news of God’s love for them and for all people.

The gospel today made me a little nervous. I didn’t like what it was saying at one point. *“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness...”* Well, that’s ok. We know that. We often prefer darkness to light, because of our evil deeds. But that’s not God’s condemnation; it’s our own condemnation of ourselves, our refusal to believe that God likes us. That’s where it starts. This is a psychological problem more than it is a religious one. Do you really believe that we are loved by God? And if you believe that, then it’s less difficult to believe that somebody else is, also. Because we harbor in our deepest psyche, I believe, the real reasons we know that we aren’t loveable. We cover them up with bravura and inflated egos and arrogance and rectitude and righteousness and orthodoxies and correct behaviors and right diets and proper clothing - and at the bottom of all of that is the genuine belief that we, in fact, are not loved by God unless we do something to fix ourselves. God simply says, *“You’re my child. I love you even though...or maybe especially because...you are broken.”*

I remember my mother - the same mother. I only had one - who would not divulge whether or not she had a favorite child. I’ve said this before: I wouldn’t have asked her that question unless I was sure that I was. *[laughter]* But I could never pry that out of her because I firmly believe she didn’t have a special child. But there was a grandchild. I remember saying to her in my adulthood, *“You’re playing favorites.”* And I nearly fell over backwards when she said, *“Yes, I am. The need is greater.”*

So for us as religious people to claim for ourselves the love of God and not be willing to believe that it belongs where the need is greatest, assassinates Jesus. God doesn’t do it. We cripple the love of God from getting to where it’s most needed when our religious behavior has something to do with us keeping ourselves pure, ourselves righteous, ourselves religious, ourselves separated from the realities of the world in which we live.

So this idea of being saved by the grace of God - by the immeasurable riches of God’s grace, being saved by grace through faith, simply by believing that God’s grace is there - is revolutionary. It was revolutionary to the Church of his day when Jesus proposed that as the only religious idea. Jesus simply said, *“I firmly believe God loves me...and you.”*

Five hundred years ago when the Church was a mess (nobody disagrees with that) the reformers returned to these words in scripture and said, *“Now wait a minute. There’s a simple theological idea here: that we don’t earn God’s love by anything that we do.”* And if we don’t accept God’s love as a free gift, we mess up the whole religious proposition that Jesus lived and was killed for - not by God, but by people who were afraid of him, by men and

women, by the religious people of his day, by the government of his day. Not by God.

And so this simple religious idea is probably and primarily the most radical idea in the history of faith and religion and traditions of the Church - that God's love is gracious and cannot be turned against us or anyone else, but is there for all people at all times - and maybe even especially for those of us profoundly in need of it. And we can celebrate that most when we realize that at the head of the line of those most in need of that loving grace stand ourselves.

Now that's a confession, that's an inventory taken that has nothing to do with guilt. It has to do with honesty - the honesty that we are God's creatures, created by God and loved by God. And we mess it up every time we think we **are** God or that we know God's will for other people better than we know it for ourselves. And the life of Jesus teaches us that when we don't get it, we're dangerous to the gospel. Friends, use the rest of Lent to practice this idea: Don't blame God for Jesus' death. Don't! And don't participate in killing Jesus today either. Try that on for size. This is extraordinary good news, and that's all we are here for - is good news!

There's a theme set in today's Collect about Jesus as the bread that comes from heaven whom we eat and who comes into us. and by eating this bread, we are incorporated into Jesus' body. A couple times this week I was over at the Toy's house, and every time I went in through the kitchen door (which is the main door of any good local house, isn't it?) right into the kitchen. There's a huge table which I saw the leaves put in so that it could accommodate more than usual. Everybody was sitting around the table eating food that everybody had brought from who-knows-where. Even I took some food. And I said, "*Is that all you people do is eat?!*" Well, precisely! What do we do when we encounter the world in which we live, and particularly those things we cannot understand? We sit together and share a meal, and we know that God is present with us in a very special way as we remember, as we live out the present, and as we hopefully look toward the future. And that is such a reality for us as Christians. We do it in a very symbolic and pared-down way. Every time we come to the Eucharist, every time we gather here, we gather around a table to talk with each other, to remember, to share joys and sorrows, and to look forward with hope. And in doing that we know, we believe, we teach, and we confess that God is present with us, and that is good news. And then our job becomes to take that which is fed us and feed the rest of the world with it.

My goodness, this is an extraordinary tradition. This is true joy. This is our faith. This is God speaking to us and saying, "*You are my beloved daughter, you are my beloved son. I have created you, and I am pleased with you. This is good news. It is yours freely and in abundance. Share it!*"

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