

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
17 June 2018

Scripture readings: Ezekiel 17:22-24 Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14 2 Corinthians 5:6-17 Mark 4:26-34

I didn't take on Father's Day in the announcements. You may have noticed. I have the same difficulty with Father's Day that I have with Mother's Day - not that I think there's anything wrong with being a father or a mother. But the interesting thing at the eight o'clock mass was that there were three men, none of whom is a progenitor, two of whom are professionally referred to as "Father"- I being one of them.

The pope mentioned Father's Day in his own country this morning. The business is to be careful with what you're celebrating and then to bring that home to the Church and attempt to make your message universal.

The Church - and particularly ours as a liturgical Church - provides a structure and a suggestion for what it is we might commemorate on Sundays. That tends to be way more inclusive than those kinds of holidays. To set the theme for every Sunday there is an appointed prayer called a Collect. The Collect for today is interesting.

There was an Episcopal priest at the eight o'clock mass, Father Jay Gordon. I indicated to him that I believe that the Collects that work their way into the liturgies of the Church of England and then eventually into the Episcopal Church in America, some of them came from the German Church of the Reformation because the German Reformation happened before Henry VIII got his nose out of joint, and the exercise was to take the liturgy of the Latin Church and translate it into the vernacular so many of these prayers probably come to us in English from the German Reformers. There are those who study just that, believe it or not.

Anyway, our prayer for today, our Collect for today, is loaded. *"Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love."* Why? *"So that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion."* Do you buy that? Can we agree on that as our theme for today? These things were established centuries before we got here - millennia even.

Earlier this week we heard an appeal by the Attorney General of this country to administer justice. I didn't hear a word about compassion. Earlier this week we heard the Attorney General of the United States quote a piece of scripture which suited his purposes, a piece of scripture which was enjoyed by Nazis in defense of their laws, a piece of scripture which was enjoyed in South Africa in defense of apartheid, a piece of scripture which I suppose our ancestors used to justify their actions against the indigenous American people. There is such a thing as law, and there is such a thing as unjust law. Even Jesus was exposed and killed by virtue of obedience to unjust laws.

Do you remember when Jesus was before Pilate? Pilate said to Jesus, *"Don't you know that I have power to kill you?"* Do you remember Jesus' response? *"You wouldn't have squat [laughter], you wouldn't have power to do anything unless it had been given to you by God."* Well, that's enough to make you scratch your head, isn't it? But Jesus didn't say, *"Because God has given you the power, you are therefore using it correctly or morally or justly. Those are choices you make, Pilate."* Those are choices we and our government make. And there are long philosophical discussions and courses taught about the problem of evil in the world.

One of the great authors is a man by the name of Walter Wink who taught at Union Seminary in New York. I'm probably not doing it justice by my encapsulation, but essentially what he said was, *"Yes, power is a gift from God, but how we bend it is where evil comes from."* In our world this week we heard the leader of a political party blame another political party for inappropriate misery being inflicted on people without having visited them to find out what in their situation might indeed be compassionate and merciful.

Jesus told parables because truth is difficult to tell, and truth is difficult to hear - even for us. Jesus used parables to help people understand. The way the writer of the Gospel of Mark put it is this: *"With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it."* We live in a day and age when we find it increasingly impossible to hear each other because we scream at each other. But Jesus did not abandon the task of telling the truth and understood that it had to be told in ways that others could hear, grasp, and understand it. And he did explain everything to his disciples in private. Who are you? Where are we now in terms of the world, and is this not a sort of private conversation that we are having as Christian brothers and sisters in attempting to face uncomfortable truths about our faith, our confession, and our belief. A God who loves all whom that God creates and who gives us power to use or abuse in the interests of or against others. And we know we can do it. We can do it both ways. The choice is

ours.

“Don’t you know,” Pilate said, *“I have the power to put you to death.”* And Jesus, who had all power, could have squashed him like a fly. But because God gives us free choice, Pilate used his choice to do what he did which led to the assassination of Jesus. Now you may remember, Pilate was not a very nice man in terms of history at all, but it was he who washed his hands and said, *“I can’t find the problem you bring to me about his man,”* and in that he was speaking to the Church. *“I don’t hear you speaking the truth about him that I see.”* That was Pilate!

We have a treasure in the biblical tradition of our Church, and we know that it’s been used and abused, proof-texted and quoted and used to beat people over the head and all the rest of it. Can we honestly pause, dear friends, and look at the story of the life of Jesus Christ which comes to us primarily through the scriptural record and ask whether or not what it is we know about Jesus squares with the way some people - even those in power - use scripture. We sing *This is my Father’s World*. We believe and teach and confess that all we have and are is a gift from God. You will hear the arguments about drug traffickers. I’ll bet you if there wasn’t an immigrant in this country, there would still be drug traffic and criminals. How about the rest of us in this room? Are you here as perfect people or as sinners? So this isn’t about hypocrisy. This is about the truth of who it is we say we embody in the mission statement of this congregation on the sign out front and that we are embodiments of the love of Jesus who stood before Pilate and, instead of creaming him, was creamed by him. But Jesus never lost his confession of the Creator God, the source of power, his knowledge of it being about to be used or mis-used, or his love of others.

And as you know, Jesus’ time was spent with and in the interest of immigrants, foreigners, poor people, women, the outcast, lepers, people with AIDS, gay people, straight people, transgender people, crazy people, people with mental and physical disability. That is who Jesus is. That is who we say we wish to embody. And that is why we are having - in a more or less private situation - a very heart-to-heart conversation - because we know this truth is hard to understand and it is hard to live out. But it is not a truth we are willing to abandon.

You may remember that Christianity is born out of Jesus’ abject failure. He was assassinated, publicly mocked, abandoned by the Church, his friends, and his family. As he’s hanging on the cross, one of the malefactors says, *“Well, if you are who you say you are, why don’t you just throw yourself down and save yourself?”* That’s a good question. Because Jesus was a human being, and he understood your humanity and my humanity and Pilate’s humanity. And he respected the choices we make, not because he likes them but because we have been empowered to make them. And you and I both know that we make good ones and bad ones. In terms of a world which is entirely involved with people seeking asylum and succor and help, you have the choice of saying, *“No. Go away. Don’t come here. We have nothing to offer you.”* Or you can say, *“This is going to be tough, but we can work on it.”*

I talked with a woman yesterday from Sierra Leone who is a librarian in Staten Island, who was accompanied by her very willowy little daughter - maybe five years old. And I said, *“Christina, what do you want to be when you grow up?”* She said, *“Oh, just a scientist.”* I learned later in the day that Christina was adopted from a family in Sierra Leone and is now asking her mother for a brother. And her mother said, *“Well, we have to sit down and talk about what that means and what that will cost and how difficult that will be.”* Well, maybe that’s where we need to be as a nation and certainly is where we need to be as a Church. How we live out our faith when it becomes something more than a privilege granted to us for a week on Sunday morning. How do we advocate for fairness? How do we make sure that *The Saint Louis* never gets close enough to our shores to see Cuba and be sent back filled with Jews and others to gas chambers in Europe as happened in the forties. That was a position made on the basis of politics - certainly not the kind of religion I know.

So our Church becomes more and more and more important, and as Christian people we need to remember that Christianity was born out of a grave - a grave in which was buried a humiliated and to all intents and purposes and appearances a defeated, crazy, wackarama Jew. But somehow three days later people started to catch on that the truth he preached, the truth he believed, the truth that he *was* could not, in fact, be destroyed. But it didn’t mean he didn’t suffer. It didn’t mean he didn’t die. But it *does* mean - and this is what our faith is based on - that the truth of the love of God *cannot* be killed. But we can make choices that attempt to do that. And that, dear friends, is not why we gather here. We gather here to practice our Christianity. We gather here to proclaim God’s truth with boldness and to minister God’s justice with compassion. It may not be easy, but it is our job!

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