

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
1 October 2017

Scripture readings:

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalms 78:1-4, 12-16

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

Having just spent a couple days in New Hope with some Lutheran colleagues and the widow of a former colleague from New Jersey celebrating Jack Elsted's 80th birthday, my Lutheran radar is really tuned up. *[laughter]* You don't know what it does to a Lutheran to read words, even from the Bible, like this: "*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*" Yi yi yi yi yi! One is saved by grace through faith. Salvation is God's gift to us. There's not a thing - blessed or damned - that we can do to save ourselves. Now, as you know, that's a popular religious idea, and it makes lots of money for the Church. You may remember one of the big issues at the time of the Reformation 500 years ago was the sale of indulgences.

I remember many years ago during the reign of Paul VI, James and I visited Rome and, by virtue of having stayed with some Dutch nuns in the Piazza Novona in Rome, we were given tickets to attend Sunday morning's celebration of the canonization of Charbel Machlouf, a saint from Lebanon. We were given seats in St Peter's, thanks to the nuns, on the far side of the high altar so we could look all the way down through St. Peter's and see this extraordinary church filled with all those people. I can remember looking up to the dome and thinking that's precisely why I'm a Lutheran because the sale of indulgences, the forgiveness of sins for a price, was a fundraiser to build the dome on St. Peter's. And so that tradition is this highly sensitive business about God's grace and the gift of salvation being God's gift to us.

It's hard for us to get over the idea and the plethora of ideas about religion as being related more to a system that we're more familiar with in terms of Mary Kay Cosmetics. If you sell enough junk for women to put on their face, your reward is a pick Cadillac. We translate that to our religious ideas and think if we do enough good, then God will reward us with a free ride to heaven - pink or otherwise. And it is disturbing, if you think about it, that the God who brings you and me into being would owe us a thing! What does God owe you? But that's that kind of theological approach - that if I'm good enough, my reward will be to sit on the right or left hand of Jesus in heaven. And since you're not as good as I am, you're in trouble so you might end up in purgatory - or better yet, in hell, where you'll burn and I won't because God loves me more than you. These ideas die hard, very hard, and are not dead yet.

We spent most of the coffee hour after the 8 o'clock mass discussing what happens when somebody who doesn't believe in God dies. Where do "they" go? It used to be if you were Roman Catholic there wasn't even a question. The question was, "What happens to all those other Christians who aren't Roman Catholic?" Do you get it?

My response to those questions is, "I don't know, and I really don't care." The point is this: If I believe in a God who is large enough to bring me into being - through all those funny ways that we get here: chemical and electrical, attractions, physical copulations. Can you imagine all of that funny stuff - physical, bodily fluids and all the rest of it ending up somehow in you and me being here? If that Creator God can get me here, I cannot be too worried about what happens afterwards for a lot of reasons, but the major reason is I do not know. And so it was refreshing to hear Melvina, whose husband died a month or so ago, say: "I don't know where he is." And somebody else at the end of the table banged his fist hard enough to spill the coffee out of my cup, which wasn't in my hand. *[laughter]* "Well, how can you say you believe in the creed which talks about Jesus who we know was raised from the dead?"

Why do we believe in all of that stuff? Where is religion taking us? What is this all about? Well, it seems to me that we run the danger of making our religion almost irrelevant if we're going to worry about what happens later. We're going to worry about what we do not know. Now it was fascinating, interesting and refreshing to hear people say, "Well, this is what I *want* to believe. This is what I *want* to happen. This is what I *want* the case to be." Well, we've got thousands of years of all that wanting and have absolutely no information about what *is!*

Unless we're going to deal with who we are here and now because I have a lot of information - and so do you - about now and about how you and I treat each other, and I firmly believe that what it is we believe about God affects how it is we believe about and treat each other. What in the world happens after now I don't much care, but it's we who believe that what happens later depends upon what we do now, then I start not to trust because when people are kind to me in order to get themselves into heaven, it doesn't look much like kindness in the end at all, does it?

When occasionally I would be impatient with James... now who in the world could have ever been impatient

with James, I don't know, but I could and did, and when I would catch myself, I would try and be apologetic, and then he would say to me, "Don't get nice now!" [laughter] Isn't that the point? Don't get nice now. Do we think that God is dumb? Wait for us to get nice later and then expect God to pay off by getting us into heaven?

So what's it all about? What is religion? Why do we bother? Why send truckloads of stuff to people in danger in Florida or Texas or Mexico and maybe even Puerto Rico, eventually? Why? Well, I'm going to make a suggestion to you that the reason we were created was to be machinery for good works. We were made to do good work. So what's the big deal when somebody finally gets around to doing a good work and they get praised for it. Big deal! You're doing what you're supposed to do. Do you get rewards for being a man or a woman? Why should we get rewards for doing the work? That's what we're supposed to do. But when our theology invites us to think that our good works can get us into heaven, then we need praise because then we want to make sure that God pays off when we die so that we get into heaven. And what's going to happen to those poor people who don't believe or all those Buddhists or Hindus or... Didn't God do a bad job of creating a world in which half or two-thirds of it aren't going to be saved because our theology says they're going to hell because they don't agree with me.

I think we can resurrect this phrase from Philippians that gets Lutherans so upset. "*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;*" Hah! There's a semicolon there so it is God who is at work in you. It is God who provides your salvation. Work out your life to live as if you believe. Then you are, in fact, saved. You have nothing to worry about. Don't bother about being nice to me now if you're not that way all the time. If you haven't woken up to the idea and the reality that we are here to do good work, not to save ourselves, but because that is what we are created for, we've missed the point, and then we create theologies to make it possible for other people to go to hell and for us to look good in God's eyes and in our own eyes. How is that for a perversion of what religion really is? And there is always perversion, and it finds a comfortable home in religion all the time. And we are first in line for that, folks. That's why we make a confession. But that's why we practice our religion, too - to rid ourselves of that perversion.

And so it was yesterday I was again appalled at the Diocese. Don't get me wrong. The Diocese is doing loads and loads of good work, and part of that good work that the Diocese is doing is helping Kajo Keji in South Sudan. We've built many buildings there. Many of them are closed now because of the politics. The people have fled across the border into Uganda where the Diocese of Bristol has had a connection for years. The Diocese has decided to build temporary schools and so forth in the new location to help out. However, at the convention yesterday the room was full of hundreds of white people, elected leaders from our Diocese which includes Allentown, Bethlehem, Wilkes-Barre, Scranton, Reading, and Stroudsburg. There was one black woman who's married to Father Mayo and Melvina Black from this congregation who came to support the Daughters of the King in their activity at the convention. There was one African American woman from Christ Church in Stroudsburg who wasn't present but who was on the ballot for the Diocesan Council. In terms of the populations and the representations and the politics behind that, we need to do better.

You know I've written to the bishop about this over the years. I really adore this guy, and I think he's done a wonderful job. I went up to him at one point and gave him a big hug. He was sitting at the table. I was standing next to him and had my hand on his shoulder, and I said to him, "But we are still all white." His response was, "One thing at a time" which I get. I'm way older than he is so I do remember things like the Jackson State murders, the Kent State murders... We are, friends, in the 21st century and, I'm sorry, it's not good enough. There *is* a perversion in a room full of white people looking at slides of poor black people halfway around the world. And I'm not suggesting that the people in the Diocese of Bethlehem who are people of color are poor. That's not the point. But I am saying that there are communities which are part of our geography who are not represented because they are not invited or elected or however otherwise involved in the power structures and decision-making structures of the Diocese. I know it sounds like politics, but I don't have any trouble with religion and politics, as you know.

I pulled a book off the shelf that I bought in 1970. I was supposed to read it in seminary and never did. That's why I think you should be required to save all your texts. You might read them later. This morning I was flipping through and there in Reinhold Niebuhr's *On Politics* are a couple paragraphs which I quickly read. This is from years ago - maybe the 40s or 50s - about an American program to give grain to India to feed people experiencing a famine and the discussions about the nation's desire to attach strings to that. If we give you this food, then you have to vote with us when we go to the table and negotiate at the United Nations, etc. That's what politics does, and that's what nations do, but it's not what the Kingdom of God is or ought to be doing. Our programs are a bit simpler as Christians. It's simply to feed those who are hungry. It's simply to be the machinery of doing good because that's what we were created to do, and

we have the nerve to do that because we know, believe, teach, and confess that we are saved by God and loved by God, not because we deserve it, but - guess what? - because we are children that only a mother could love, and so is everybody else in the world. And as children who are so deeply loved and who believe that we are that deeply loved, we can do nothing else but love others.

So no matter how much my brothers and I might disagree, we do know that if one is hungry he will be fed, if one is thirsty he will drink, if one is in danger he will be in the home of the other. We know that, despite differences. And what makes the Church any different from that? Nothing, absolutely nothing!

And then we get this extraordinary concept - again from the epistle lesson today - about Jesus. St. Paul probably wrote this: *“Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.”*

The question was asked at the coffee table after the 8 o’clock mass, “Why keep the Nicene Creed there?” I have friends who are pretty theologically sophisticated clergy people from other traditions who ask, “Why do you do that every week?” Well, I have the same question. There *is* a shorter version. But the point is this: It, like scripture, is a part of informing ourselves on a regular basis of where we come from and how ideas about us as a people and Jesus as a person have evolved. The first parts of Christian scripture weren’t written until 50 or 70 years after Jesus was dead. Imagine writing something about 1970 or 1960 now, accurately. Before that was the Torah and the Hebrew scriptures which were thousands of years before that.

Melvina was very vocal about it: “Yeah, and the Nicene Creed was all men who made that one!” Well, she was right. When we get to it, notice that the first paragraph is about God the creator. Nobody argues about that sentence. Nobody has much trouble with God as a spirit. The last paragraph is easy and brief and includes all kinds of stuff about the Church and all the rest. But the Church wants to talk about who Jesus was - the Jew 2,000 years ago. The paragraph gets big and thick with ideas about virginity and holy birth and all the rest of it, which are ideas that were loaded, I believe, onto Jesus to make him special but which are an invitation to us, it seems to me, to forget what he said rather than who he was. Let’s care a little bit less about who he was and a little more about what he said. And get this: St. Paul speaking about being a Christian - *“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit (Don’t get nice now!), but in humility (Now listen. There’s your take-home phrase for today) in humility regard others as (not equal to yourselves. That would be American. This is Christian.) Regard others as better than yourselves.”*

So let me make a suggestion. I don’t want to have an argument about this. However, in a society and culture in which we live which attempts to de-value others for a lot of reasons, on the basis of religion and country of origin, etc., and when it gets really close to home, when we want to build walls between us and the Hispanics in Mexico, when it comes to caring for our own citizens, then they should be at least equal if not better, our own citizens who live on an island where their native language is Spanish (that’s an American tongue) and they travel under passports from this country, why does it take so long? I suspect that it has to do with our attitudes about others and our institutionalized prejudices about poor people, foreign people, people who don’t speak English, people who have darker skin tones than ourselves, etc., etc., etc.

So the business of being Christian has to do with regarding others as better rather than equal, and then, it seems to me, we’ll start to make progress and our doing of good will not be so much the business of gaining credit with God, but exercising our task for which we were created, to be the machinery for doing good and understanding ourselves as priests and bishops are supposed to understand themselves. Here’s the Latin term: *servus servorum Dei*. That’s in the masculine and the singular, but it translates, “We are ordained to be (and you are baptized to be as members of the priesthood of all believers) a servant of the servants of God. And we gather here to practice our religion, to be the people who regard others as better than ourselves and who work together to teach ourselves to be servants in the world because we were made to be the machinery of good works, and we are not deceived by a religion that would tell us our good works make us better than anybody else, but give us the opportunity to express God’s love to others as God’s love has been expressed to us in the first place. Now ain’t that easy! Amen.

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