

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Fifth Sunday of Easter
14 May 2017

Scripture readings:

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

"If in my name you ask for anything, I will do it." Have you ever asked and not gotten what you wanted? Really? What could this possibly mean? I don't know. It has frustrated me since I have known this text. I've known people who have asked desperately for things and in God's name and heard "No" or at least *"Not your way"* as the answer.

And then we read that Jesus is the only way to the Father. We make hay on that as churches, don't we? Unless you are a Lutheran and believe what Luther said and you join a Lutheran Church, you're going to hell. Or was that the Methodist Church or the Baptist Church? *[laughter]* Maybe the Roman Catholic Church; maybe the Orthodox Church. We do this all the time. We have the right way to believe. We have the right organization to join. This organization is of God, and unless you do it this way and join that bunch, you're not going to encounter God. That sort of seems to come out of Jesus' own mouth today. We are in the 21st century. We're a pretty savvy bunch, and we know that it ain't necessarily so. So here we are left to struggle with what all this stuff can mean.

Judy Restaino read the first lesson at the eight o'clock mass today, and I know that she came out of the Lutheran Church in New Jersey many years ago where her pastor was a college classmate of mine. That was a congregation in Edison, New Jersey, named St. Stephen's. The congregation where I grew up in Allentown was St. Stephen's. We have that in common, and we have this wonderful text about the martyrdom of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, sounding an awful lot like Jesus himself: *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* I'm sure that's what I would say if I were being stoned to death. Right? *[laughter]*

I'll tell you what came to mind when I read this text. You know Richard Strauss' great opera *Salome* with the text written by Oscar Wilde. In the last scene of the opera, Salome has demanded the head of John the Baptist be given to her on a silver platter because she finally has agreed to Herod's demand to dance a sexy dance for him. He promises to give her anything up to half his kingdom, and all she wants is the head of John the Baptist, and Herod is scared to death to do it because he knows that John is a holy man. The last words of that opera are *"Kill that woman!"* and in the last scene in the opera they all rush together with their shields and crush her to death. I have that sort of image of the crushing to death of Stephen. Something was appalling and grotesque about what he was saying to those who felt moved to martyr him. Stephen was revolting to them when they heard what he had to say about Jesus and what he believed about Jesus.

It's easy for us as the Church to get tied up in what it is we've already been tied up with in the past, and I suggest it's not the best direction to go anymore. It's this business of unless you're our kind you won't get to heaven. *"You cannot come to the Father but by me."* What in the world did Jesus mean by that? Well, maybe Jesus is saying the way to see God is to see the world the way he sees the world. Now I can start to live with that because it's very clear to me that Jesus and probably Stephen and others and, I hope to God, you and I see the world in a different way, a different way from the rest of the world perhaps - in a different way from a national view of the world, in a different way from a religious view of the world, in a different way from an economic view of the world that prevails among us, in a vastly different way that is the way Jesus saw the world. And what was that way? The way he saw the world was that every human being had value and was an equal to him. The woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, the tax collectors and sinners, even the churchly people - the scribes and Pharisees, the blind, the maimed, outcasts from society, widows - widows had

no value. They were pimples on the rear end of society. And Jesus saw all of these people as having value, as equal to himself, and as having been loved by virtue of having been created by God. The only way I can resurrect the meaning of this text for me is that Jesus is saying if you see God the way I see God, then you will see the world differently.

Philip says to him, *“Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.”* Well, we know how honest the disciples and the other people around Jesus were. Just do this and we’ll believe. Just do a few miracles and we’ll believe. They had no intention of believing because Jesus had already shown them the Father. Jesus said to him, *“You have seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? Do you not believe that in me you see God?”*

Now I find it hard to believe that Jesus says this. I think these words are given to Jesus by the early Church. Jesus is way too humble, I believe, to have said those things about himself - and maybe even not that self-conscious. But wherever the words come from, they apply. Jesus says it himself, and again I believe it is the early Church saying this, not Jesus himself necessarily. *“The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.”* If you don’t believe who I am, where I come from, where I’m going - scrap it! Just look at what I’m doing.

Could I suggest to you that that might be the same test that we as the Church need to provide for the world when we invite the world to believe in what we believe in. You don’t have to believe in all the crap or all the dogma or all the theology or all the creeds. Just look at what we *do* - how these Christians love one another and the rest of the world. The test of believing in God is simple. It’s simply doing the love that we acknowledge God to be.

It was glorious, absolutely glorious, in this room yesterday at one o’clock to have a young couple present themselves for holy matrimony. The bride herself looking something like a northern renaissance painting that might hang somewhere in the Cloisters Museum in New York - heavy with twin children, the proof of their existing love. Maybe, if we’re fortunate, the first two to be baptized here in our new font. We talked about that. And to sense among the young people who gathered here -most of whom I did not know from Adam - their affection for each other, which had very little to do with the creed or government or anything else but their affection for each other.

Seldom, friends, have I ever at a wedding reception been brought to tears. The best man spoke of being raised by a single mother - one of four - and how he admired his friend who was married yesterday, who was a neighbor down the hall in the same apartment building and in whose home he found a welcome and was fed and nurtured and expected to read the Bible with his mother when he got home. He told how he admired his friend who was well cared-for in a loving home which had enough to share with him that which was lacking in his own home. Seldom do I cry at toasts but I did yesterday because that’s all that Jesus said and did. It’s that simple. If you want to see God, find God in your relationships with each other and look at all people with the same kind of love you want to tell other people God has for you.

Of course it’s easier to talk about it than to do it. That’s why we *practice* religion. That’s why it is we come here regularly to remind ourselves that our God is larger than any god of any nation including our own, that our God is larger than any demographic including our own, that our God is larger than our diocese and more colorful and more multilingual than our diocese apparently is at its power-sharing levels, that our God is larger...And this is why I get so angry when I see bumper stickers that say, *“God Bless America.”* I have no problem with that, but I’m convinced that that’s only half of a bumper sticker, and the suggestion is that the rest of it is, *“God damn the rest of the world.”* And that’s not a part of our faith. It just isn’t, and that’s not Jesus’ world-view. Jesus says if you want to see God, see the world as I see it and then you will know who God is. And guess what? The rest of the world will know God in you - not because you are God but because you are a building block in the sanctuary, the safe place that God builds in the world called the Church.

Jesus is seen as the head of the corner. *“See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”* Well, that cornerstone was understood to be a

stone that wasn't quite sound enough to be used in the building by the original builders so they discarded it. They threw it out in the street, and people started to trip over it. It became a stumbling block. The word in Greek is *skandalon*, a scandal. Jesus scandalized all of religion, all politics, all economy, all of our identities that would exclude anyone else for any reason - even those we're most afraid of - and says you *can* see God. Look at God in me.

These have to be the words of the early Church. Jesus himself, in my estimation, could not speak of himself that way, but the early Church *could*. And we along with the early Church can say, Hah! This is how God is seen in this world, when the faithful are mortared together, built together into a structure, into a household, into a sanctuary, into a safe place in the world which is connected to a stone at the corner which has the world-view which Jesus has.

I cannot be convinced, having sat across the table yesterday from a South African man of Indian heritage who might be a Hindu and who shared with me the love of his family quite generously and quite genuinely thanked me for the blessing I (meaning you) shared with his youngsters at that wedding. I can't be convinced that where he has known and seen love - his wife having come from Haiti - that God wasn't there somehow. Try it on me. You're not going to get very far. And that's the mother who taught the kid down the hall the Bible.

We have to be less afraid and proprietorial, it seems to me, about our religion - and more inclusive and willing to be scandalized, tripped up by Jesus in order to believe that God is seen in Jesus and, therefore, God can only be seen in this world through us who are connected to Jesus in how we behave. It has nothing to do with what we think. Jesus says it himself: "*If you don't believe this, then just look at what I do.*" It's not important that you believe. It's important that what you believe affects what you do. And so it is we come together to practice our religion, to do what it is we intend to do because of what it is we believe with God's help and God's strength. So that's why we return to the Word of God, to take it in our ears, and we return to the table of the Lord to ingest that in our mouths and in our bodies so that we might become as Mary was - a container for the Almighty - and carry the Almighty in our being to the world which will be understood in how we relate to other people.

Now remember this: because Jesus loved other people, the people who didn't - killed him. Stephen was not going to be dis-convinced of loving other people, even those who were killing him when he was martyred. "*Father, forgive them.*" And who knows what the challenges are that lie ahead for us? But we come here to remember to whom it is we are connected as bricks in a building designed to be a household of prayer for all people.

The first communion class has done a little song we used to do in camp a thousand years ago. I'll bet you can sing it with me:

*I am the church! You are the church!
We are the church together!
All are God's children, all around the world!
Yes, we're the church together!*

Amen...Don't think I'm finished.

I was disappointed by my friend the pope this morning. Looks of shock and surprise! Do I have your attention now? [*laughter*] In his address to the folks in St. Peter's Square after having just come back from Portugal from celebrating an anniversary at Fatima, and I think they've started to create a cause for the sainthood of the kids who had the apparition at Fatima - he had all of the thousands of people in St. Peter's Square pause in an extended moment of silent prayer in recognition of those around the world who today are celebrating Mother's Day. Now that's a man at the head of an organization run by men who have certain peculiar ideas about virgin motherhood which is impossible to understand. It's certainly not a valuable example for anything human. I get it, but there's also more to be gotten about that celebration today. Yes, even among us.

It starts with a woman named Louise Luppold who was a parishioner in my first parish. Louise was a

German immigrant. Her husband came first. He had to earn enough money to bring her over. Louise desperately wanted children. She had a sister who had two boys, and I know she offered to adopt one of her nephews, and that didn't fly. She was always very grateful to me on this Sunday in the church year because I have always asked people to be careful about this holiday. Do we know what we're doing when we say these things?

The woman who started Mother's Day was a woman named Ann Jarvis whose original effort was to get mothers of both sides of the Civil War to care for their injured sons and to come together without being divided by party. Her daughter Anna continued the effort and lobbied for this national recognition and eventually became very, very, very dis-enamored of how the holiday was being celebrated. I read a report of when she was having lunch at Wanamaker's in Philadelphia, having ordered the Mother's Day salad. She threw the salad on the floor and the money on the table to pay for it and stormed out. She was furious with the floral and greeting card industries for having cheapened the sense of this. She started the business with carnations which you've all seen - white carnations for your dead mother.

The Church and the world are filled with women whom Jesus recognized as individuals and equals. Just this week I heard of a woman who is giving birth to her third or fourth child which she is providing for others as a surrogate mother. There are women who have been mothers who have not wanted to be. There are women who have wanted to be mothers and who could not be. There are women who have been mothers whose pregnancies did not come to term. There are mothers who have had children who are dead. There are women who have been bad mothers. Yes, there are women who have been good mothers, but to ask the Church which is way more inclusive than one pathetic white North American concept of motherhood to celebrate this day without a heightened sensitivity about motherhood is, I believe, contrary to the catholic faith we confess which is inclusive of all people.

I drove by the Baptist Church in Honesdale yesterday and I thought I don't need to go there on Sunday because I'm not a mother. It wasn't many years ago in a Methodist Church somewhere in the Poconos when Aunt Gertie and James were with me - all of the women who were mothers were asked to stand, and my ninety-year-old aunt was expected to remain seated - she who continues in her one hundred and second year to mother me. Some man didn't hear what was said and he stood and was barked to sit down because he wasn't a mother!

I think we need to re-visit the whole concept of motherhood. Is it the simple physiology of giving birth? Does it have something to do with caring for infants and the young? Does it have to do only with those who are mine genetically? Can't men mother?

Take from this what you want. I just want the Church to remember that it's just not as simple as the greeting card and carnation holiday it often sorts out to be. The Church should never be in the business of hurting anyone, and that's not where the Church needs to hang its hat. I think it's problematic enough that the Church insists upon understanding Mary as a virgin, which suggests that there's something wrong with having sex, and because I think it suggests that Jesus wasn't fully human. The Church understands Jesus as being fully human and has no trouble confessing that Mary is a part of that whole theological idea that gives him flesh. So what's wrong if she had sex?

So it's a complex thing, and we get sucked into it without thinking about it. My appeal is: let us with the diocese, with this congregation, with all that we do, work at being the Church so that when people look at us, they will say, *"There is God alive in this world with us in these people."* And then we will see God more clearly ourselves.

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