

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
17 September 2017

Scripture readings:

Exodus 14:19-31

Psalms 114

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

I remember growing up hearing the excuse not to go to church: because it was filled with hypocrites. What a perfect description! It's also filled with sinners, and here we are. It's an extraordinary collection of folks - aren't we? - who come together on a regular basis to listen to stories like this very, very painful parable in the gospel today about a slave being forgiven a great sum of money and choking to death a friend possibly, a colleague, an equal of his for the nickel that he was owed.

I don't know why, but when I read this story I did a little research about a ship that came to the shores of the United States in May of 1939 called the *S.S. St. Louis* with 900-some passengers on board who were refugees from Nazi Germany who had to pay for their passage and purchase their documentation. Their ship was turned away in the ports of Cuba, the United States and Canada and was filled with persons seeking safety and asylum in the free world and in a country at whose New York harbor stands a statue, which was a gift from French people, proclaiming, "*I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*"

The ship, which was part of a German/American line, returned to Germany. Subsequently, 200-plus people on that ship were sent to their deaths in concentration camps, 300 and some were accepted by Belgium, and the balance were accepted by France and England. A very, very embarrassing moment in the history of this country which may have occurred during the lifetime of some of the people sitting here, but not so long ago that it's not a part of our own histories.

And of course one is never supposed to discuss religion or politics, but since we're in church, let's talk politics. *[laughter]* Do I have your attention?

We gather here because we have a gift which is larger. We gather here because we come essentially to make a confession. We come here because we believe that we are by nature sinful and unclean and cannot help ourselves, but that we are not without hope and that we are not beyond being used for something better by the creator who we believe, teach and confess puts us here in the first place, that despite our limitations of time and space and culture and language and political party that Christianity is something larger than a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, a Communist or whatever.

Jesus leaves us this treasure trove of stories about how it is we - and he lived in a similar kind of world to ours - that's the important piece of the incarnation - that the Church has treasured a memory of this man Jesus and enshrined him in all of the...I'm tempted to use the example of an M and M...hard sugar coating of divinity but there is that sort of uncolored chocolate in the middle - the real humanity of Jesus that the Church has enshrined Jesus and what he had to say, for darn good reason because he said to the people who lived in his day - and I firmly believe says to us who live in our day: There are identities which are bigger and better than the tiny ones we accept and participate in which are smaller than our faith in God who is the creator of all people everywhere.

So that should inform us about how we treat others. If it's just a matter of talents and denarii, hundred dollar bills and ten-cent coins - Oh, that's cheap enough. We get that, and we hate to be treated that way, but we all understand economy. But do we understand the divine economy which is not like our economy and no, I don't buy the whole business of the gospel at the end when you should be scared and shivering in your boots because if you don't do it this way, God's gonna burn you up in hell. "*And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.*" How can you be tortured and earn money to pay a debt? How can you be in prison and be expected to pay off a debt? It's the dumbest thing I've ever heard! *[laughter]* Debtor's prison. It means you get your family to pay it or something. I don't know. I don't know how it works. I don't want to know.

But I do know this: That we gather here as people who believe, teach and confess that our identity as Christian people is larger than any of the other smaller identities in which we all participate and *must* participate. We are either male or female or trans. We are either hetero or homo or somewhere in between. We are either white or black or mixed. How about yellow or red? We are either from here or not from here. We either speak English or you should learn to speak it the way I do. *[laughter]* The point being that as Christians our challenge is to live in this world in a fashion and to say those things and do those things in a fashion that should prevent the kind of embarrassment which is a part of our

history of only seventy-some years ago. It may not be easy, but it's important. And the question is, when push comes to shove, will we say, "*Not on our shore, not through our border, not in this country. Go back home.*" Or will we say, "*We have been forgiven a thousand talents. This isn't our place anyway. Our ancestors and progenitors came here from elsewhere also. The people who were here first are still in cages which we call reservations.*"

I think Jesus offers us a vision even larger than that - "*The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and all who dwell in it.*" It says nothing about me and my kind. It says that I and my kind are a part of God's creation. And so Jesus gives us the treasure of this embarrassing story, which drove me to the embarrassing story of 1939, for us to honestly gather here and make a confession. Now confession is a funny thing. I think we all have something to confess. I'd like to talk to the author of Romans because I think he or she has a confession to make. "*Some of you believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables.*" That wasn't much of a judgment, was it? [laughter]

One of the Roman bishops of Chicago was in Philadelphia this week to celebrate the Triumph of the Cross in the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul. They were using some rule left behind by the pope in the backyard, Benedict, that under certain circumstances you could use the old-fashioned 1962 rite. God forgive me, I was in stitches of laughter. You want to see miters - Wow! And gloves! When was the last time you've seen episcopal gloves? And all of the regalia and formality. It was comical to me because it was pretty clear to me that they weren't entirely comfortable with it themselves. But I wanted to give this preacher a good hearing. In a similar fashion to the author of Romans, he talked about the Triumph of the Cross and the importance of a tortured and bleeding and pained and dead corpus, body on the cross as opposed to some of our Protestant neighbors who have plain crosses. That was really "helpful" and thoroughly ecumenical. [laughter] And P.S., not very historical because the first crosses in the first 500 years of Christianity were without bodies, believe it or not! You see, friends, our work is never done. [laughter] But thank God that we gather here regularly to work at this stuff.

So we are here to deal with our own hypocrisies. We are here to make confession, and the nice thing about making confession in the Christian Church is this: There is no rite of confession in the Church, about which I know, which is published or available without a rite for absolution attached to it. The Church understands that you should never confess a damn thing without the assurance of God's blessed forgiveness attached to it. That's what's understood. That's the kernel of the gospel. That's the good news that Jesus point to - that we are, in fact, human but our humanity does not make us unloved by God or the object of God's punishment. But because of our humanity we are the object of God's love, and God proves that so much by becoming human God's self, as the Church confesses, in the person of Jesus Christ - to live and to die among us as one of us. God is thoroughly in love with us because we are her children. Then yours is a sin only a mother could forgive.

Now what makes us joyful is that we come here to accept that forgiveness when we make that confession. How dare we turn around and club somebody else over the head for the damn nickel they owe us on the way out of church? How dare we who came here and took this property from somebody else, dare turn away anybody else?

They're fair questions. They might require repentance and it might require work for us as Christians to speak the truth, to speak it in love and to continue to have an ongoing conversation about what it means to be a Christian in this world in this time and in this place. It doesn't mean we're going to agree, but it does mean in the end when we speak to each other we won't be as a Democrat or a Republican or an Independent or even a Communist but as a Christian whose first confession is this: *In the beginning God created the entire world and everyone in it and, therefore, by God's grace and by consanguinity - our blood relatedness to God - that we have to acknowledge those of our brothers and sisters whom we find quite frankly troubling, quite frankly awkward, quite frankly different, quite frankly God's children as well as we are.*

And so we continue to practice our faith because Christianity, friends, is not doing what come naturally. It's doing what we believe and have been taught to believe by a Christ who came into this world and did what came by the grace of God what was loving for the world.

This is tough stuff. It's real stuff. It's good stuff, and it's substantial stuff that if you look hard enough and work hard enough and believe it - is also filled with joy and opportunity and possibility and offers us the option to do and be something other than hypocrites.

Fasten your seatbelts, Lutherans. By their faith and how they live out their faith, you will know precisely who they are.

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