

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
2 October 2016

Scripture readings:

Lamentations 1:1-6 Psalm 137 2 Timothy 1:1-14 Luke 17:5-10

In the middle of the week a phone message was left that said, "*Do you want us to delete the last verse of the psalm?*" - a question asked by the organist.

"Happy shall be he who takes your little ones and dashes them against a rock!"

That's challenging stuff, isn't it? Any wonder you ask! Well, it's in the Bible. "*Oh, the B-I-B-L-E. Yes, that's the book for me!*" [laughter] The Bible says so. Do you see how careful we have to be with scriptural texts? This is a psalm, a song to God in response to the Babylonian captivity. The Israelites are unhappy and they, like most human beings I know, want retribution and they want to do to their captors exactly what their captors did to them.

Well, if that's not bad enough, let's go to the gospel for today and we find some support for slavery. The gospel of Luke doesn't say anything about "*Don't have slaves.*" It says, essentially, when you have slaves, treat them like slaves. Learn from this. This scriptural text comes to us in context. Different pieces were written at different times. The Bible wasn't written as a book. It is a collection of writings which at some point in history a group of men - yes, they were all men - sat down and decided this will be in and that will be out. They made their decisions on the basis of their own theological ideas, opinions and - dare I say - prejudices. That can't be entirely wrong. But I suggest to you, friends, it *is* entirely wrong if we don't take these texts and read them and use them in a similar fashion that they did and apply them to us and our day and our time. It's nice to know in the 21st century that it could make our skin crawl if we say we would be happy if our enemy's children were dashed against a rock.

There is an interesting word that Freud or somebody came up with - a German word, of course - called Schadenfreude. *Schaden* is hurt and *Freude* is joy. It's taking pleasure in somebody else having a problem and we not having a problem. But there's a message in this stuff. There is something to be said here to us. We know that we come here to hear good news, not bad news, so where do we find the good news in this? Sometimes it's hard, it's difficult. But in the gospel today I think there's a suggestion about good news. It has something to do with what it is we mean when we talk about saints. Anybody come to your mind when I say saints of the 20th and 21st centuries? Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Corrie Ten Boom, John Paul II, Archbishop Tutu. Above the great western doors in Westminster Abbey in London there are tributes to saints of the 20th century as understood by the Church in England, and among those saints are Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bishop Luwum of Uganda. So we have a sense of what it means to be a saint even in the 20th and 21st centuries.

I must tell you this: when I was in England in August in one of the newspapers there was a large editorial article taking the sainthood of Mother Teresa apart with criticisms about the institutions she started, how poorly run they may have been, mismanagement of funds, etc., etc., etc., all of which is worth knowing, but my personal feeling at the time was that anybody who writes this kind of article doesn't tell us how much other good work he or she has done. It's easy to say, "*She hasn't done it the way I think maybe it should have been done,*" but they don't say what they have done. And that's where hypocrisy leads to in terms of all the business of doing and celebrating good works. Now, do I think it's bad to celebrate good works? Heck, no! Do I think it's bad to not thank people? Yes, of course it's bad not to thank people. I think the process of giving thanks is more helpful to the person who offers the thanks than the person who receives it.

There's an interesting suggestion in this gospel today which is worth our consideration. "*Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, should say, 'We're just worthless slaves, and we've only done what we ought to have done.'*" Maybe the suggestion that is being made by St. Luke is, "*So you did a good work. Big deal! You did what you were supposed to do.*" And then we create religious systems that say, "*I did more good work than you did. That means God loves me better.*" And then we're sure we know something about what happens when we're dead. We're sure we're going to heaven and you're going to hell because I did more good work than you did.

All of you in this room are old enough to remember S&H Green Stamps. *[laughter]* And what did we do with them? We collected them and then we went to the catalog and we turned them in for something that we redeemed at the redemption center. We bought toasters. There were theologies developed about Jesus having an abundance of green stamps. His life was so good and so perfect that he could trade in all his extra stamps for his friends to buy them back from the catalog of hell. It's called supererogation, a fancy Church word for that. And so we developed religious ideas that you'd better be a good friend of Jesus because he can buy you out of hell with his good works because somebody along the line figured out that none of us can do enough good works, even if we were Mother Teresa, to save ourselves. And then we get lost in the muck and mire of she did a better job than I did. Well, she certainly was known by more people than you and I are. I don't have trouble with the Church keeping a calendar remembering people whose lives were exemplary and all the rest of it. It gives shape to our year and to our life. It gives us people to remember. St. Francis' Day helps me remember Barbara Kimber's birthday in England, so that's a good thing. *[laughter]* But you know what? If we read some other parts of scripture, we start to understand and believe that if you have been in and out of a baptismal font...Anybody here been baptized? No, I didn't mean Episcopalian. I'm just talking water; I'm not talking flavors! *[laughter]*

In the early Church the definition of sainthood is those who were baptized. So we're all in that category. Well, I'm no Mother Teresa. Well, thank God you're not. You are who you are! We are all understood by God by virtue of baptism, by virtue of being connected to and included in the Body of Christ in the Church - we are all understood to be saints. The challenge in that is that whatever our activity and wherever it may take place, even in of all godforsaken places, Hamlin, Greentown or Newfoundland, to say nothing of Lake Ariel, wherever you live is where the activity of the saints of the Church of Jesus Christ not only *can*, but *should* occur. How you live your life - I'm not talking good works, I'm talking about *how* you live your life in relationship to other people will prove that sainthood isn't just for the stars of the show. I think it used to be in the Roman Church that you had to be dead for a hundred years. Well, nobody's waited for John Paul II to be dead that long. I remember when he *lived*. Nobody's waiting for Mother Teresa. There is an urgency in these days for sainthood to be understood, seen, realized, enjoyed and celebrated!

Well, guess what, friends, we gather here to celebrate our sainthood all the time. We gather here to do what we do, not because we're afraid of God or we think that she is an angry man with a beard on a cloud with arrows and spears to throw at us when we mess up, but a Creator God who creates *us* and everybody else in the world and who loves us and everybody else whom God has created! And the only different among us is that we are saints. So what does that mean? It means we have a perspective which is inclusive rather than exclusive. We have a faithful view of the world which allows us to make the mistake that Jesus made. You think Jesus made a *mistake*? I thought Jesus was perfect. Well, Jesus must have made a mistake with the Church. He must have made a mistake with the government. He must have made a mistake with the economy. He must have made a mistake with the politics and politicians of his day because they all ganged up on him and killed him.

So the mistake we run the risk of making is the same mistake that Jesus made. It's believing just the first page of the Bible. That's enough. *In the beginning God created the heavens, the earth and everybody in it, and God loves whom God creates.* As tough as it is, I guess we have to confess that God loved the Babylonians who mocked the Israelites and asked them to sing their joyful songs and they couldn't do it. They just hung their harps on the trees. They couldn't be happy until they had their land back, and they wanted to see their

oppressors' babies crushed.

Well, they had the first page of the Bible too, and sometimes our traditions embarrass us. We know in our own past that the Church has supported, condoned and permitted slavery in this country. St. Philip's Church in Harlem was the slave chapel of Trinity Church Broadway and Wall Street. And we can't point fingers at them. We all know what this is like. The interesting thing about the people who have been raised to our consciousness by the Church and whose images are carved and whose names are known throughout the world is, I think if we scratched and not too hard, we would find that they were all people who grew out of prejudices and into more faithful life and learned to love other people, not because they were trying to make God love them, but because they knew God loved them from the get-go. So they could look at their enemies in a different way. That's a tough one. It's a very, very tough one. The only way to get anything accomplished with those with whom we differ is, I firmly believe, to be able to have a sane conversation which implies a certain amount of mutual respect and trust.

You know I have impatience about the bumper sticker "*God Bless America.*" I don't think that's a bad idea, but it's only half a bumper sticker because I'm afraid that in many cases the rest of that bumper sticker is "*God Damn the Rest of the World.*" That's not a good enough prayer for the saints of the Church of Jesus Christ because the admonition at the end of Matthew's gospel is to go into all the world, love the whole world. The proclamation at the beginning of Genesis is "*This is my Father's World and I am my Creator's creature.*" I am *not* the Creator.

In between the masses we were having an interesting discussion during coffee hour about having ideas about God. Someone suggested that if I have a complete idea about God, then I know I'm wrong because God can't fit inside my little brain entirely. God has to be larger than my ability to grasp her. Ah, why *her*? Well, because I think gender with the Almighty, on either side of that fence, is limiting. So we are encouraged by our baptism to believe that in fact, brothers and sisters, we *are* the saints of the Church of Jesus Christ. Nobody has to carve your image above the door of this church. All you have to do is bring your image *through* the door to be reminded that you're not yet carved in stone, you're not yet dead, you're not yet remembered for what you have done, but that we together constituting the Body of Christ are the living Christ in the world today and our sainthood is a lively sainthood. We are encouraged by each other and by the examples of others to do good works, not because they will get us into heaven, but because we know God loves us and our big works in the end are just simply big whoop.

To live as those who are loved and truly believe we are loved by God will change us. To live as those who truly believe we are truly loved by God - get this - will change the world as much as any of those big name saints have. It may be simply in one relationship with one other person. It may be simply in the question of an organist who says, "*Isn't that a terrible thing for us to have to say in church?*" And it is! And isn't it a blessed thing that we can gather here in love and respect and talk about these things and say, "*Now wait a minute. This is important for us, for our lives and for the world in which we live*" and say, "*I see in you a saint.*" I know there's stuff about us that isn't saintly. You certainly know stuff about me that isn't. But the pleasure of our being gathered by a loving God is that God says to us from the time we are able to do nothing other than demand food and mess a diaper, "*You are mine. I love you, and I love you to your last breath.*" It's that simple. And if we can live as if we are that much loved, as I said a moment ago, we will be changed and I am certain, friends, so will the world in which we live.

Good works - big whoop! Loving God - that's the gospel!

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