

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Second Sunday in Lent
21 February 2016

Scripture readings:

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17- 4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Today is one of the days that we're out of sync with the Roman calendar. You may remember on the last Sunday before Lent the Gospel was the account of the Transfiguration of our Lord, and I vaguely remember mentioning at that time that Rome reads that account on the second Sunday in Lent which is today. I think it's on the 6th of August that it occurs another time, which is forty days before the celebration of the Triumph of the Cross in September. But today was their day, so this morning the pope was talking about the transfiguration text and what he said was that his visit to Mexico was transfigurative. I think he meant that for himself and for the church and certainly - although he probably couldn't say it - I'm sure it was for the people in Mexico. It interests me that he was on the same continent as we are, but because he was on the other side of the Rio Grande we didn't get as much coverage as we did when he was on this side.

So that was one of the three prongs of his message today. The second was his celebration of the meeting between himself and the head of the Orthodox Church when they were in Cuba. You know the Great Schism occurred when the Church divided East and West around the year 1054. It was time for that to be over, right? And then he said that tomorrow a meeting begins in Rome for people concerned about and interested in bringing to an end the use of capital punishment. He talked about what a grave responsibility that is and how Catholics will have to be very courageous in their opinion about this issue.

You do know, of course, that most of the great countries and cultures of western Europe survive very well without capital punishment. You do know that capital punishment is known not to deter capital crime. You do know that when capital punishment is reinstated, capital crime increases. You do know that when capital punishment is exercised innocent people are killed. You do know that capital punishment is exercised inappropriately all the time and used as a tool against minorities and poor people and the disempowered and the disenfranchised.

It's worth thinking about in terms of our lectionary, the Epistle lesson: "*Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from heaven that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.*" It's a very interesting time for us, particularly in the middle of presidential election campaigning - are you aware that's going on? [laughter] - for us to think about where our citizenship lies as Christian people. And in our country as in others, Christianity is being hijacked left and right for people to argue their political positions. I don't think anybody can vote anywhere in the world without going into that privilege with his or her convictions in place and religious postures, but I'm unhappy when people tell me what my Christianity looks like and it looks like something that I don't hear or see or find in the message that I receive - and I think that we share - that comes to us from Jesus.

And fascinatingly enough, I heard Bernie Sanders - and I remember this because he's not Catholic...neither was Jesus - in a debate with Hilary Clinton, and he said - and I was astounded at this and, quite frankly, delighted - that he was opposed to capital punishment because it was violent and that as a nation he didn't feel that violence was our business. Think how you will, vote for whom you will - the point was that he took such a non-popular approach and I found it breathtaking. It isn't popular to say that. On the basis of what I know to be the Christian message, I find that an inappropriate way for a nation to act. What we need to do is to remember that our citizenship is in heaven, and we are members

of a political organization which is larger than the geo-political nation of the United States.

Somewhere along the way this week I heard someone who had been to Canada say how much the Canadians love us. It surprised me and I asked why. "*Because we're paying for all of the defense!*" [laughter] It never occurred to me.

We are citizens of a larger reality which insists that what we defend is good for all because we believe, teach and confess that the world was created by the same God and that everyone in the world is a child of the same God and, therefore, everyone is our brother or sister.

Now in the Epistle lesson we also read the warnings about those for whom their god is their belly. "*I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is their shame. Their minds are set on earthly things.*" Well, that can mean a whole lot of stuff, but when I think of the belly I think of the armadillo. I don't know that I've ever seen one alive, but you know what they are. The armadillo to protect itself protects its belly. It's the most vulnerable part so it curls up. It makes of its entire exoskeleton a shell, and essentially when it feels threatened it turns its back on the rest of the world as protection.

A lot of theology is accused of being self-reflective. In the sixties we used to call it navel-gazing. We are invited left, right and center to take care of Number One and by that we mean ourselves. We are asked to be afraid of the world. We are invited to be fearful. We are invited to think that our entire society is falling to pieces, going to hell in a handcart, and maybe in some places and some respects it is. We are invited to blame those problems always on somebody else. We are very seldom asked to understand our responsibility, our subtle responsibilities - our responsibilities in how our economy works, our subtle responsibilities in how our social systems work, our subtle responsibilities in how our healthcare delivery systems work, our subtle responsibilities in how we live our lives in relationship to our neighbors - because they're all systems in which we participate - like it or not - and we have to. But none of us - at least in this room - has yet lost her or his voice.

Organizations have an identity. The Church, our organization, has an identity. And we as a congregation sit down regularly to decide what it is we want to do, what it is we want to look like, and what it is we as a congregation, as a part of a larger identity of The Episcopal Church - what it is we want to say about ourselves and what it is we want to say to others. I think the origins of our beliefs are related to scripture, but certainly not to a literalistic reading of scripture, but to say in fact we are citizens of a larger entity than the geo-political realities of any country or nation in the world, that our political postures are related to a vision that all people - right, wrong or indifferent - are children of God and that they along with us are God's beloved. They are not to be the scapegoats for our guilt, our problems and our misbehaviors.

There was a man who was very loud, very well politically received, very popular, who offered people a solution and they bought it. His name was Hitler. One man with a couple of apparently good ideas to loads of people who was allowed to do what he thought would solve the problem for them. They protected themselves and not their brothers and sisters, and that's what happens. It can happen. It *has* happened. It *can* happen again.

And a lot of that stuff, friends, was argued in terms of Christianity. I had the fortune of studying with a man at Muhlenberg College who had worked in the underground church in Germany during the War - Hagen August Karl Staack. I remember just a few of the stories he told. One of the most devastating to a huge gothic chapel filled with students and faculty of the storm troopers in Germany going into synagogues and taking out the scrolls, the Torah, the Books of the Law - handwritten, treated almost as human beings - unrolled them in the streets, took down their trousers, defecated on the scrolls to show their contempt. Jesus' Bible! But "*they*" had been identified as *the* problem, making our lives miserable. And that's what happened.

We are citizens of a larger country, a larger kingdom, a larger reality. Our citizenship is in

heaven, and it's from heaven that we expect a Savior - and a Savior not just for us but for all of us, for the world. Now I don't know how you responded to the first lesson, but I think it's fascinating when people say, *"God tells me I can live in your land. I cut up a few animals, sacrifice them, have a dream...Get out of here. This is mine. God gave it to me."* Now that seems like a long time ago in a place maybe many of us haven't been. It happened right here. It was called Manifest Destiny. People with religious ideas that weren't popular in Europe came here. *"Oh God gave this to us. Oh, you were here? God gave this to us. You get out of here. I'll give you three beads and a bottle of beer and then this will be mine. You're still behind fences in reservations."* Now that's politics. That's government. That's economic systems. That's the Church at work, unhappily. It's the systems we all live in and participate in. We are lulled to sleep to forget about those injustices and our - however unwitting but nevertheless real - participation in those injustices. So you say, *"What shall we do about it?"* Well, I don't know, but I guess constantly be aware that justice needs to be worked for and toward and for all people.

Just this week I saw a man on tv - and I regret that I do not remember his name - but he was a very high official in the Botha government in South Africa. He was an enforcement officer for apartheid. He was hated and executed his job effectively throughout the nation and has since retired, and now every day he delivers food to the townships in Johannesburg, every day he visits black school children and everyday holds those children on his lap, and publicly, sincerely and honestly looked at the camera which brought his image to me and said, *"I was wrong."* He knows, probably, that he should be in jail but he feels compelled to make amends and to behave differently from the way he did in his professional life.

That reminded me of a very poignant moment some years ago when James and I were in Johannesburg. I remember putting a key into the door of a hotel room standing next to James and entering that room, knowing that a very few months before we got there he would not have been able to enter that room as a guest or as anything other than a subjected black cleaner to prepare that room for a white person to occupy.

Now those are systems, those are governments, those are the way we as human beings organize ourselves, and as this man - whose name I painfully regret I have not remembered - has grown up and out of positions, opinions, profitable employment doing the wrong things, that he could in his lifetime come to the point that he could say, *"That was wrong. It was a mistake. It was sinful."*

When James and I visited Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was interred for years, our tour guide was - as all the tour guides are and I guess will be until they're all dead - people who had been interred on the island themselves, and he very straightforwardly spoke to us about the high incidence of alcoholism among the former prisoners but that they come and they do this because they want people to know the story. But every time there was an opportunity to ask questions and as people asked *leading* questions for him to speak ill of his captors, he would not. Under the leadership of Mandela and Desmond Tutu there is an absolute refusal to fight those old battles. Their commitment is to reconciliation and moving forward. It is possible. I saw it happen in front of me!

These are people who were subjected to the ridiculum of human insanity. James and I had a cab driver who was taking us somewhere, and he was upset - he was not white - he was upset because he felt that the system since apartheid had been done away with, that blacks were being preferred over coloreds in terms of opportunity and reparations. You've done it, haven't you? We've all done it. *Why don't they get over it? When are the Jews going to stop complaining about the Holocaust? They get equal opportunity today. They/us. They/us.*

I remember at that point asking him, *"Well, how do you determine who is white, who is black and who is colored?"* He said to us, *"You do it with a ballpoint pen. You take a ballpoint pen and you run it through a person's hair. If it sticks, they're black. If it drags, they're colored. And if it slips through, they're white."* [laughter] Lee Black was here at the eight o'clock and laughed himself silly. I

wasn't sure if he was laughing or crying. That's how stupid it is, and it's still going on - a lot more subtly, but it's still going on - not just there, but here.

So what delights me about this text and what delights me about Lent is that all these stories inform us that change is possible. The change I'm talking about is not change there and with them but that change is possible inside the human breast, that we can - by telling the truth even where it is unpopular - have for ourselves a different viewpoint, a different kind of life and make a significant difference in the world and how people treat each other. It may not change the politics of the nation or the world, but it certainly has something to do with how we treat each other and how it is we go to a biblical text and say, This speaks to me because I prefer and I believe, teach and confess that I am a citizen of heaven and that citizenship is way more important than any other in the world, and in fact that citizenship can inform every other citizenship in the world, and that citizenship is the one that connects me to a Savior - not just of me, my kind, my people, my language, my color, my gender, my preference, my cuisine, my clothing, my couture - but the Savior of the whole world who invites me not to be afraid of that which is different, who reminds me that the systems in which I participate willingly, happily, unwittingly and unknowingly all involve me and that I can speak to those in my own way as a person who sees myself as belonging to something greater and more beautiful, less fearful, more caring, more interested in sharing and equality and justice and willing to say, I'm not in charge of it all but God can in fact turn my heart, open my hands, and use me as an instrument of the same kind of love that I have received that brought me into citizenship in that kingdom of heaven as well.

Lent is the perfect time because that's what repentance means. Repentance means not beating yourself up for being guilty but turning around and acting and living as if you are forgiven because you *are* forgiven, turning around and living as if you are loved completely, sufficiently, entirely by God and turning around and living and loving as if everyone else in the world is too! There are no disposable people. There is in the Kingdom of God no acceptable collateral damage. All are children of God and love is God.

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