

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Tenth Sunday After Pentecost
13 August 2017

Scripture readings:

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 Romans 10:5-15 Matthew 14:22-33

"How is it," some might ask, "that you would dare, Father, to celebrate a funeral during a Sunday morning mass?" Well, I'll tell you - because there's nothing we would do differently at a funeral. The question was asked at the 8 o'clock mass this morning: "Why is that big candle out?" It's usually parked over by the baptismal font and not lit. Well, that big candle is the Easter candle. It is lit at the Vigil of Easter and burns throughout the Easter season for 50 days until Pentecost - or in some traditions until Ascension Day - without being extinguished. Oh, when you go we put it out [laughter] but it's always burning when we're here. Medieval churches made these candles of 33 pounds of wax and they didn't put them out.

It's a sign of the resurrection of Christ, and it's out because at every funeral and every baptism after Easter in the life of the church we remember Easter particularly and its message of God's promise of resurrection. That's the only thing we do here. Every Sunday we celebrate the resurrection, that Christ is alive and with us when we gather and is particularly perceived by us in fellowship when we share a meal.

By the way, that candle will burn here next Sunday because Brian will be baptized. The entire business of the Church is celebrating a belief that we have that Christ is risen, Christ is alive, and Christ is with us!

There's an interesting thing in the lessons today that I want you to think about with me. In the epistle lesson from Romans we heard these words: *Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?" or "Who will descend into the abyss?"* But what does it say? It says that *the word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.* Take a moment and think with me of how much time and energy and money has been spent by church people and by the church convincing people that they have something to do with purchasing their way into heaven. Think about how much of the energy of the church has been to teach people to live right here so that you can go there and not there. You buy it, don't you? We all get sucked into it, don't we? It's a sort of temptation to believe something other than what George said: "*We're not in charge of this. If it were our choice, it would be different. It is out of our control, this life.*" But that's not all that George said, and it's not all that the gospel says. What it says is, "*Don't worry about what's going to happen afterwards.*" Try that out for a week. Try it out.

What does it say? *Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend?" Do not ask, "Who will descend into the abyss."* But remember this: *the word is near you and on your lips and in your heart.* What does that mean? In the beginning of John's gospel we have these wonderful words: *In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.* So from the earliest times Christians have understood that the Word of God becomes flesh and in that sense they were probably talking about Jesus, period. But we over the centuries have come to understand ourselves here also to be the Body of Christ. We gather around what is left of George's flesh and bones, and nobody would say that George is in there. But we dare say and we dare celebrate and we dare believe that in George's relationships with everybody that Sherry read about and in a special way in his relationship with Bernice - God was present because love was present. And that was on their lips and in their hearts. And I suggest to you that God is present among all of us and any of us and each of us wherever and whenever love is on our lips and in our hearts even in places where God's name is not known. Where love is known, there God is because God is love. And George said to Bernice in his note, "*My love for you is eternal.*" And one of the natures, it seems to me, of true love is timelessness.

And so we gather today to practice our religion. You may remember what I said to you, that it's our custom here to regard anybody who takes the energy and effort to walk through the door as a member, as a potential person to love and by whom to be loved, with whom to share love and with whom to share love with the rest of the world.

In the gospel lesson today we read about Jesus walking on the water. Is there anybody here who has never heard a joke about that? [laughter] It could have been ice or knowing where the stones are or whatever. But there's information in that story that's important for us today. Think about it for one minute. They're in deep trouble. They're on the sea. The sea is a mess. The weather is bad. They're in a cockamamy little fragile boat. And although some of them were fishermen, they probably weren't great sailors. And Jesus comes to them on the water.

Now Peter is an arrogant egomaniac. Have you ever met one of those? [laughter] He says to Jesus, "*I want to do what you're doing. I want to be just like Jesus and walk on the water.*" Jesus says, "*Fine. Come on.*" And he does but

not very well, not very long and not for very far. He gets scared. And what's the information in that story for us? That God comes to us way better than we can ever go to God.

Another thing, it seems to me, the church has spent a great deal of time on teaching people how to get to God: These are the prayers you have to say and the things you have to do. This is what *you* have to practice in order to get to God. But this lesson simply says, *You can try and you might get a couple steps, but on your own, you're going to sink. But nothing, absolutely nothing, can stop God from getting to you.* And that, friends, is good news! And then the question is: you have received this good news of God loving you enough to find you even in the storms of grief, even when you're at your worst, even when your heart is most broken, even when you are lonely, even when the world seems turned against you, even when you fashion yourself as a victim. God is able to get to you, and then the question is how will God get to the rest of the world? That's answered on the feet of those who believe, carried on your lips and in your hearts to others in the rest of the world.

I was busy most of yesterday. A friend called me in the evening to find out how Lee was doing at the hospital. He said, *"Have you heard the news of Charlottesville?"* I'd only heard a snippet. I didn't know what the whole story was. But Kurt is a local historian, and he's highly invested in the business of people remembering, as well we should. And that's what our faith is all about - remembering God's goodness, God coming to us, the fact that we are loved more by God than we can love God. He said, *"What do you think about taking down pieces of history?"* And I said, *"Should we erect statues to Hitler? A very important piece of history that should not be forgotten."* And when he came to church this morning I said, *"By the way, Kurt, how do you feel about pulling down the statue of Saddam Hussein?"*

There are pieces of history that aren't complete and we need to put together. And then I thought of my partner of 43 years who sat right there usually on Sundays. He was born in Charlottesville, Virginia, and grew up in a little town not far from there called Waynesboro. And James, who became one of the great church musicians in New York City in his day, as a little boy - and he was a beautiful little boy because I've seen pictures - was forbidden to go into the library there because he was black. That a good reason to keep people from reading, isn't it?

So what we are being asked by God to do is to do what George did - to whistle and to sing of God's love for all people and to remember that God is in charge of the entire shootin' match. The one thing you may not know about George is he is known to be the only person to go into Sacred Heart Hospice singing. When I visited him on the first night he was there, he said, *"I expect to be home in 3 days."* And I thought to myself, *"George, nobody goes home from hospice in 3 days."* He proved me wrong. You know, he's home, he's safe, he's happy, he's in God's charge, and there's nothing we can do about it except what scripture suggests we can do which is take care of ourselves here and now and share the love of God that he had and shared with Bernice and his family and friends with each other and the rest of the world.

Forget about where you're going. Remember where you are *now*, and live as if what the scripture says is true - that the word of God can be and should be and is on your lips and your hearts and God, therefore, has flesh and blood and hands and feet in this world here and now today. And we thank God that George did too, and we'll get there.

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