



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, February 13, 2022
The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany (Septuagesima)

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26
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God's good memory

I think that
One of the most profound images and experiences
Of the reality of the mysterious love of God I cherish most
Was gifted to me by a woman with dementia.
This was some years ago now.
I was visiting her with communion
And before we shared together in the Eucharist
We talked for some time.
I think, for the majority of our visit together,
She thought I must have been a student of hers from an earlier period of her life
A seminarian she might have helped train
Who was just there to check in and say hello.
She was keenly interested in how I was doing since we'd last seen each other,
What I was up to, where and how I was settling in to wherever it was I settling in.
She was deeply curious. Invested.
Our conversation gently meandered from one topic to another, one fleeting reminiscence to another.
She'd had a full and marvelous life,
And it was a profoundly tender blessing
To hold with her and cherish with her, however briefly, some of the fragments of that marvelousness.
Eventually, I prepared a nearby table for Communion,
And after praying the Lord's prayer together, halting but holy,
I gave her the precious Body of Christ
And my my my! What an incredible smile spread across her lips
Her eyes wide with happiness, delight illuminating her face.
She held the Bread of Life before her and exclaimed with such joy:
"Oh! It is so good to share this good memory with you!"
It was a profound insight into the nature of the Eucharist, the nature of God's love.
She knew, in part because of a life of prayer and worship well lived,
She knew, even as dementia frayed her memory, frayed her own recollection of her life,
She knew, regardless of what she could or could not remember,
There was One who could remember her completely.
As her own life became more and more obscure to her,
There was a Mystery in which she knew her life was truly held.

And she trusted it to hold her.
She trusted it to remember her.

One way or another, all of our readings this morning challenge us
To be clear about: who remembers us, who holds us,
In what are we rooted, by what are we filled,
On what is our faith founded.

Jeremiah contrasts trusting in human beings, in ourselves, with trusting in God,
The former producing accursedness, the latter bearing the fruit of blessedness.
What's interesting about Jeremiah's description of the accursedness
Of trusting in the deceitfulness of the human heart
Is not just the imagery of spiritual drought and blight...
It's that the blightedness of trusting in the things of this world,
In mere human and wordly power and authority
Which always and inevitably look like death and darkness when divorced from relationship with God...
The blightedness is specifically characterized as utter loneliness and all the more lifeless for it
To trust in human power, our power, the powers of this world
Is to set ourselves apart not only from God, but, ironically, from each other,
From community, producing the conditions and structures of violence and oppression
That fund such accursednesses as racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ageism
And every form of death and death-centeredness that can twist the human heart.
That word "deceitful" in Hebrew describing the heart
Suggests an aimless, pointless meandering through trackless wastes:
Wandering from God means wandering from our humanity
From love, justice, healing, goodness, right relationship
Because it's in God that our humanity is fulfilled and perfected:
We were made to be in relationship with God;
To wander on our own without God, without community,
Is not to self-actualize, but to self-destruct.
We become ourselves most when we give ourselves to God and to each other for God's sake,
When God holds us, when God is our rootedness, our refreshment
Our righteousness, the source and fruition of our goodness,
And all of it the work of love and the fruit of love.

One of the beautiful things about this brief introduction to the Lucan beatitudes we heard earlier
Is the subtle emphasis throughout on a community centered on and empowered by
The healing presence of God.
Before these verses, Jesus has just chosen his community of disciples,
And here he models for them, in healing power and word, the sort of community he's called them to be.
One of the two words used for healing here in the Greek
Has a sense to it of a healing that's accomplished through care,
A real relationship of care that undoes the work of unclean spirits in the lives of others.
Jesus is showing us here a radical possibility of what a community centered on,
Held by
The love of God can do and be in a broken and wounded world
Simply by being present to it and with it in love.
But he's quick to point out: this possibility of blessedness is realized
When we are empty of the world's deadly riches and skewed sense of fulfillment
Empty of the world's fleeting pleasures
Empty of the world's poisonous regard,
Because emptied out in this way,
Following the lead of the One who emptied himself for our sake,
The one who, as Father Absalom Jones wrote on the occasion of the abolition of the African slave trade,

rose “from his throne—not to issue a command to the armies of angels that surrounded him to fly to the relief of his suffering children—but to come down from heaven, in his own person, in order to deliver them.”¹

Following the lead of the one who went to the place of death for us,
The salt-desolated wilderness of sin and death in which we had too-long wandered alone,
The one who went there to make living waters flow in the desert from his own pierced side
Following his lead,
We can be filled with the fullness, joy, grace, and wonder of God
And take our stand with Christ,
With the outcast, the rejected, the despised, the least, the lost, the lonely
To whom and to all people, as to the repentant thief,
He is endlessly offering the healing blessedness
Of the Paradise of his own wounded heart.
In light of which, it’s worth noting that the word “woe” describing the lot of those
Who are so full of the sin-sick world’s deathliness
That they leave no room for God to enter with the fullness of God’s healing grace, joy, peace,
That word “woe” is an onomatopoeic Greek word that suggests a cry of anguished pain,
Not violent wrath,
At the self-inflicted destructiveness
Of those who follow the deceitful paths of the human heart:
Who will not be held by, filled by, filled with, God.

In our reading from First Corinthians, Paul is wrestling with folks in the community
Who would not or could not believe in the Resurrection of Jesus,
And he’s quick to point out that a Christianity without the Resurrection doesn’t amount to all that much:
“if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins,” he says.
If there is no resurrection, then an innocent man was killed on the cross
And that’s it: just another death,
Another day in the weary world’s indefinitely darkening calendar of woe.
If there is no resurrection, there is no forgiveness
If there is no resurrection, there is no way out of our bondage to sin.
If there is no resurrection, death has the last word and is not undone.
If God cannot exhaust our violence, our rebellion, our finite death in his infinite life
If God cannot make of death an entrance into a newness of life,
What hope is there?
Without the resurrection, how do our wandering hearts find their home?
How can we participate in God’s glory if we cannot be transformed by it and into it?
How can we become, together, the living body of Christ if the body of Christ is dead?
The point I think Paul is making is: the Resurrection has consequences,
Not just for doctrine, but principally for a life,
And for the community, the world, in which that life is placed.
And for Paul, who’s just gotten through explaining how he received the faith from the Risen Christ,
How he went from being a murderer to the Apostle to the Gentiles by God’s forgiveness and grace,
For Paul, the doctrine is revealed by the shape of grace
The shape of the Mystery
Visible in a transformed human life.
It’s as if he’s asking, “Is your faith in the Mystery a function of your ability to comprehend it,
Or is your faith an expression of the Mystery alive in your life?
Do you think faith is a matter of grasping the Mystery,
Or is it a matter of allowing the Mystery to grasp you?
Is your faith in your own capacity to know things and know them well
Or in God’s capacity to know you, and know you fully, in love?
Is your faith just yours, or is it Christ alive in you and in the community shaped by Christ’s presence?”

Because if the Mystery of Love that is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and yours,
If that Mystery is just another truth claim to be debated, proved, or denied like any other
And not first and foremost
An invitation to lose ourselves in the Mystery of Love in order to be found by it,
Then indeed we are of all men most miserable.
Our wandering hearts and minds cannot seize faith by our own power,
But we can receive it as a gift of grace; and having received it,
We can be rooted in the Mystery of Love which, by faith seizes us, claims us,
And we can let that Mystery transform us into the people of faith, the communities of faith
That God desires us to be.”

That saint with whom I shared communion years ago,
She knew all this: something must hold us.
We must be rooted in something.
I hope we all may know it as well...which is to say:
I hope, like her, that we can let the Mystery of Love know itself in us, be known in us,
Hold us, remember us,
Not as we may know or remember ourselves through a glass darkly,
But as, by grace, we are known and recollected in Christ;
That the Mystery would be our mutual knowing.
Saint Augustine famously exhorted the people about to receive
The Eucharistic Resurrection Body of Christ, Broken and poured out for the world:
“Be what you see, receive what you are.”²
May we do just that,
And share this good memory,
God’s memory
Of us and of all things fulfilled by and united
In, with, and through the Mystery of Love that is Jesus Christ;
May we share this good memory
Of a reality that is even now making itself known in and through Christ’s own Body the Church;
May we share this good memory with each other
And,
In and through our lives rooted in the Mystery of Love,
Like trees planted by the waterside bearing the fruits of God’s own righteousness
May we share this good memory
By which we are re-membered
With the world.

¹ Jones, Absalom. “A Thanksgiving Sermon, preached January 1, 1808, in St. Thomas’s, or the African Episcopal, Church, Philadelphia: On Account of the Abolition of the African slave trade, on that day, by the Congress of the United States.” Philadelphia: Fry and Kammerer, 1808.

² Saint Augustine, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi Opera Omnia: Post Lovaniensium Theologorum Recensionem, Castigata Denuo Ad Manuscriptos Codices Gallicos, Vaticanos, Belgicos, Etc., Necnon Ad Editiones Antiquiores Et Castigatiores, Opera Et Studio Monachorum Ordinis Sancti Benedicti E Congregatione S. Mauri*, Editio Parisina altera, emendata et aucta, Vol. 5, Part 1, “Sermo CCLXXII,” (Paris: Gaume fratres, 1837), 1615.