

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, June 26, 2022**

The Third Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

*on*

1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21; Psalm 16; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

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## **Why not be totally changed into fire?**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

One of my favorite stories from Thomas Merton's *The Wisdom of the Desert*,

A collection of Merton's favorite sayings and stories

From the Fourth Century Desert Fathers and Mothers is this:

“Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said:

Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast,

My prayer, meditation and contemplative silence;

And according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts:

Now what more should I do?

The elder rose up in reply and stretched his hands to heaven,

And his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said,

Why not be totally changed into fire?”

Why not be totally changed into fire?

Why not become a living flame?

What's stopping you, the Abbot asks, from being a living flame of love?

In the course of my own ongoing conversion to Jesus, to love,

(And conversion isn't a static thing or a once and done thing, but an ongoing thing)

I return to that story:

What excuses am I making to keep from catching fire, to keep from blazing with love,

To keep doing the comfortable little thing that I'm doing,

Without making my life vulnerable to transformation?

What am I holding onto that I'm being asked to let go? By what do I continue to be bound?

In our Gospel this morning, we're given three examples of excuses for why we won't catch fire,

Excuses to refuse the grace that desires to transform our lives

Why we hesitate to follow where our Lord leads.

And in every instance, what's involved is a fear of being led away

From those things that seem to us

Most certain, most familiar, most comfortable, most reliable, most right, most good

Into a fierce, unpredictable, wondrous strange wildness of love and life

That defies our expectations

Renders uncertain all our certainties

Challenges us and empowers us to become something we can scarcely even imagine:  
A people of love, citizens of love's kingdom, children of God.

Our Gospel begins with a brief story that provides some context,  
An example of what it is that gets in the way.  
Jesus is travelling and has sent some messengers ahead into a Samaritan village  
To prepare a place for him to stay,  
But he decides not to stay there after all, because he's determined to get to Jerusalem,  
And the messengers don't receive him.  
James and John, though, have another version of events:  
The Samaritans must have seen that Jesus was going to Jerusalem and, knowing he was Jewish,  
Must have conspired not to offer hospitality to him on account of the antipathy  
Between the Samaritan and Jewish peoples. (Many scholars have a similar reading.)  
So, living into their nickname as the hotheaded "Sons of Thunder", James and John have an idea.  
Let's destroy the Samaritans. With divine fire from heaven.  
It'll make violently clear to everyone: they are wrong. We are right.  
Jesus, however, is not having it. He knows they're ablaze with the wrong sort of fire.  
"Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of," he says,  
"For the Son of Man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."  
The disciples have assumed that God shares their prejudices and hatreds.  
The disciples have assumed that Jesus is okay with their comfortable divisions  
Of us over against them  
Have assumed that Jesus would be happy to ratify their hatred with divine violence.  
This rivalry between the Samaritan and Jewish people was fundamental  
To the disciples' understanding of their identity as good people  
on the right side of the dividing line: we're better than them.  
So Jesus' shutting down of their plan  
Is not just a mild, "That's a bit far."  
But an insistent, "You don't know who you are or whose you are  
When you are being possessed by violence, hatred, and spirits of division.  
That leads to destruction. The spirit of God leads to redemption.  
God is not the death god you want or expect him to be."  
Love unsettles their sense of self, destabilizes their certainties,  
Pitches them outside themselves toward a new understanding of who they are  
Grounded in love, grounded in Jesus.

The stage has been set for three encounters that will continue the theme of upsetting certainties  
Undermining three ways by which we can come to understand who we are as over against others.  
In the first encounter, Jesus meets the eagerness of a would-be disciple with,  
"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests;  
But the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."  
More than a warning of the difficulties of discipleship,  
This is an important correction to the man's ambitions.  
For many scholars, what's at work here  
Is that the man expects Jesus to fulfill certain Messianic expectations,  
Violently overthrowing foreign Roman occupiers, restoring the kingdom of Israel  
Being a king like or comparable to other kings...but better because, of course: ours, on our side.  
But Jesus is keen to point out:  
Just as God is unlike any other god, his kingship is unlike any human kingship.  
In fact, he says, it finds no place in this world of violence and death.  
The man may have been seeking a position in the Messianic court, a page of the new regime,  
But the kingdom of God is not a matter of scheming or power, or realpolitik,

But of self-sacrificial love unable to settle or be at peace  
In a world, in a political order, characterized by injustice, violence, and oppression.  
To a second man who excuses himself from following Jesus by saying he must bury his father,  
Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God."  
It may sound harsh to a grieving child, but Jesus' concern for the man is that he's being run by,  
Patterned by, centered on death; and he invites the man to become a herald, a countersign  
Even in the midst of death,  
Of a new culture with a new commandment to love:  
God's Kingdom of Love and Life unfolding in the world.  
Finally, to someone who wants to put off following Jesus until he can say goodbye to his family,  
Jesus responds with a difficult word:  
"No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."  
This is another way of saying,  
"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness,  
And all these things shall be added unto you."  
If anything comes before the pursuit of the Kingdom  
If we prefer anything to the Kingdom  
We can be assured that even those good things we prefer  
Will be misapprehended, ill-used, disordered, and death-infected.  
It's as if Jesus, who will create new ways of being family beyond biology or convention  
When he gives his Mother and his Beloved Disciple to each other as Mother and Son,  
Who says that his mother and brethren, his family, are those who hear the word of God and do it Jesus is  
inviting the man here to understand family in a new way,  
Unbound by mere human expectation or convention,  
And to understand himself, definitively, as part of this new family,  
The Kingdom of Love.

Three encounters, three expectations, three excuses for not following Jesus' way,  
For not catching love's fire  
Three invitations to become something new.  
These three encounters name three common ways by which we're bound,  
Three links of chain the Cross is designed to break.  
The difficulty of course is that we may not realize our bondage  
Nor desire the breaking of our chains  
Our familiar politics, our social cultures, our family lives and structures—  
They can all feel very cozy, very safe, very comforting, very good,  
So cozy, safe, comforting and good that we may be unprepared  
For the ways by which they can pattern us toward bondage and death,  
By being the relational arenas through which we so often learn, intuit or understand:  
Who's in, who's out; who's us, who's them;  
Who we're meant to be "better" than.

This is not to say that political, cultural or familial structures should be done away with  
For being unable to fully bear the good that God desires for us and for the world:  
It's to say that they're all in need of redemption.  
They're all in need of the liberation of which Paul speaks in our epistle today.  
All human institutions are in need of redemption.  
All human relationships are in need of grace.  
And the Way of Love, the Way of Jesus, the Way of the Church, the New Creation  
Critiques every human institution and every human relationship  
In order to expose every aspect of the human  
To the forgiving, sanctifying, and divinizing grace of God.

Our political, social and familial cultures simply cannot produce  
The grace and liberation to which they so often claim to give access.  
Grace, liberation, are found through Jesus Christ.  
In part, I think all this explains Jesus' focus on Jerusalem:  
He's eager to perform the work of redemption for which he was born,  
And he desires nothing less for the people he loves,  
(Which is to say for you and for me, and for everyone)  
Than the work of redemption he's about to accomplish.

The fact of the matter is: Jesus does not desire us bound by anything of this world.  
Jesus desires for us our complete and total liberation  
A liberation, in other words, that will enable us to love,  
That will pitch us completely, totally and inexorably toward love.  
This is why the incarnation, passion, resurrection and ascension happened:  
Because God would not abide our subjugation to the powers of sin and death  
And so freely willed to receive from us the chains that bound us  
Freely willed to receive from us the political, social, and familial expectations common to us  
Freely willed to receive from us our violence, our hatred, our spitting, beating, maiming, tearing  
Freely willed to receive from us our death  
Freely willed to make of himself something to be bitten and consumed  
So that we might stop biting and consuming each other,  
but be transformed into a new community through communion with his own flesh and blood  
So that he could break all our chains by and in the infinite power of his love  
And give us the endlessness of his own divine life.

Receiving our life, our identity, our very selves from nothing else but God,  
We are enabled and empowered to live the lives of  
Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control  
for which we were made  
By which and with which God imagined the character of our lives  
from before the foundations of the world

And if we were to fully receive from God who we are,  
We should not be surprised when we discover  
That a fire has been kindled in our souls  
Is consuming and transforming our lives  
In the very Blaze and Brightness  
Of Jesus Christ's own fierce and fiery glory of Love,

To whom be all honor and power and glory with the Father in the Unity of the Holy Ghost ever one God  
world without end. Amen.