

March 8, 2020

Read Philippians 2:12-30

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Philippians 2:12-13

These verses perplexed, if not unsettled me, early in my journey of faith. I had come to understand Paul’s message in Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” I had come to understand that my salvation was not earned by living a good enough life, but was a gift of grace, unmerited favor, given by God to those who simply trust the gift of Jesus and His cross. How, then, could Paul be saying to work out salvation?

The story is told of an Anglican bishop riding on a train, who was asked by another gentleman, “Are you saved?” The bishop proceeded to parse the verb in Greek to say (translated), “I was saved, I am being saved, I will be saved.” Therein lies the key.

So often we think of salvation as purely past tense: I was saved. I was saved when I put my faith in Jesus, and nothing more needs to be done by God or by me for my salvation. It is the truth that we celebrate every time we gather in worship!

Scripture, though, uses all three tenses. Not only was I saved by putting my faith in the finished work of Christ, but I am also being saved in the present as the Holy Spirit makes me holy, and will be fully sanctified (saved) when Jesus comes again. That’s what Paul is getting at in these verses. We are to continue to work out our salvation in the here and now as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit’s work of making us like Jesus. This is the work of sanctification. We are being sanctified.

How do we do that? “For it is God who works in you.” The Holy Spirit continues to make us like Jesus! That’s where the fear and trembling come from. God is at work in our lives to make us like Himself! We are not meant to sanctify ourselves; in fact, we can’t. All too often, we seek to make ourselves more like Jesus by trying harder or doing more. But it really doesn’t work. Instead, we are sanctified as we allow the Holy Spirit to renew us from the inside out.

So what role do we play? We engage in spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines allow the Holy Spirit to keep us connected, like branches to the vine, to Jesus, who renews us from the inside out. We don’t engage in them to go through the motions or earn God’s favor, but instead to stay humbly surrendered and dependent upon the Lord. When we do, Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, sanctifies us and makes us like Himself. We work out our salvation, our sanctification.

During this season of Lent, are you working out your sanctification, your becoming like Jesus? We have been saved by the cross of Christ, and are now to allow Him to sanctify us as we keep ourselves connected to Him. Not in our own strength, but with fear and trembling, for God Himself is doing the work.

Fr. Karl Dietze
Trinity Anglican Church

March 9, 2020

Read Matthew 17:24-18:14

“And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.” (Matthew 18:13)

I recently lost my wallet. I retraced my steps after arriving home that evening. I scoured the car in search of it. Nothing. It's never fun to lose something that is important to you. It's also an unpleasant experience to be lost yourself. I'll never forget one of my first memories of this happening as a child. I was in the mall with my mom, when I got distracted by something in a store front and wandered away. It only took me a few moments to realize that I was alone and I didn't know where to go. I hurried off with a sense of urgency in the direction we had been walking. To my relief, I quickly spotted the print of my mom's skirt.

The closing section of our Gospel passage today speaks to both these experiences; losing something of great value, and of being lost. Jesus paints a picture of how valuable every single person is in the eyes of their Creator. In this parable, Jesus does not set up categories for people like we do. There are simply those who are at home with God, and those who have wandered away and gotten lost.

It appears that Jesus was teaching the disciples two lessons at once. First, God's love seeks out everyone, including those we deem have nothing to offer and might even be considered unlovable. Second, the disciples themselves had wandered away by focusing upon who was greatest among them. By placing people into categories, they ran the risk of creating barriers that might block others from coming home to God (18.1-9). In this sense, the disciples themselves were lost.

This gives us a beautiful image of the gospel: Our heavenly Father rejoices every time someone comes to faith, as well as every time one of his beloved children is brought home after wandering away (13). Just as I couldn't give up on finding my wallet (which eventually showed up), God cannot, and will not stop seeking to extend his love to all people. And it gets even better.

I'll never forget when I ran after my mom's skirt pattern and reached up to grab her hand. It was only after I got a firm grip that I realized the lady looking down at me wasn't my mom. I let out a cry, which soon got my mom's attention. The gospel declares that Jesus seeks us out whenever we wander away. His Spirit at work in us seeks to reveal when we're wandering away. They seek us out! We're invited to respond with the desire to be found, to come home so to speak, and to cry out with repentance and faith. At that moment we can drink deep of God's gracious forgiveness knowing that Jesus has us in his firm and loving grip.

How are you prone to wander away from home through your judgments of other people?

Father Mark Hall
All Saints Anglican Church

March 10, 2020

Read Exodus 17

But there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" (Exodus 17:1b-2)

It's been a hot summer day. You were out in the yard working all afternoon and you are ready to head inside to relax for a bit and cool off, appreciating your toils. Once inside, you see a jar of lemonade that was left on the counter, sunning in the south-side window. The contents of the jar are just about as sunbaked as you feel. Frustrated, you head over to the freezer for some ice only to find that the icemaker is still broken and your son used up the little remaining ice that you had left. So much for a delightful afternoon of relaxation... Looks like you'll be busy with repairs on the ice machine instead.

The people of Israel have been journeying through the wilderness on their way to Sinai, where they will make their covenant with the Lord, who had miraculously and powerfully delivered them out of Egypt and slavery. They had not been shy over the last few weeks in making their disappointments known to Moses over their provisions in their wanderings in desolation. They had tasted bad water, felt empty stomachs, and now were camping in an area completely lacking any water. Sure, the Lord had made the bitter water sweet and had been raining down daily bread from heaven, but wasn't it time for them to get to the real pay out for their troubles? When was God going to get around to providing the good stuff?

Fed up and frustrated, the people lashed out at Moses once again, this time even issuing threats. Some had even been gathering choice stones to lynch their leader. After all, did this murdering, brainwashed, Egyptian sympathizer of a leader really have their best interests in mind? For that matter, did his God?

We are easily dissatisfied when things don't happen in the way that we would like or expect. It can lead us to becoming short-sighted and accusatory against anyone who may stand in our way, even God. It can lead us to say, "*Is the Lord among us or not?*" (Exodus 17:5) Does He even care about the situation that I am in right now?

The example of lemonade on a hot day certainly seems petty to us, but God was willing to abundantly provide for His people in the desert, by bringing water out of a rock. When we find ourselves spiritually tired and thirsty, God wants to provide for us living water. He invites us out of the wilderness, out of the scorching heat, to be refreshed with His own body and blood. Whether it is a moment of petty dissatisfaction, or apparent life and death, the Lord desires to share His abundant and overflowing life and presence with us. If we let Him, we may find that we are actually satisfied, even to the very depths of our souls.

Deacon Steve Braun
Trinity Anglican Church

March 11, 2020

Read Colossians 1:1-20

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints” (Colossians 1:3:4 New International Version).

The city of Colossae was a prosperous city in Anatolia, modern day Turkey. The diverse citizens of Colossae often practiced syncretic forms of worship, blurring pagan spiritualism with philosophy and Judaism. The Christian church in Colossae, founded by Epaphras, found itself tempted to believe the errors and heresies concerning the truth of Jesus Christ as head of the Church. St. Paul is very anxious that the Colossian church remain faithful to the truth of the Gospel, and that it not become corrupted by either worldly doctrines or legalism.

The letter begins, however, with St. Paul thanking Almighty God for the love and faith of the believers *“all over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth” (Colossians 1:6 NIV)*. The letters of St. Paul are not only devices of instruction to the churches that he founded, but are also filled with sincere affection for the early followers of Christ. Just as we today grow in the understanding of Christ through these letters, we also feel the love St. Paul had for the universal church to come.

During this Lent, I encourage you to consider writing a letter to a loved one. A letter rather than an email (which I always attribute to work) can provide a great deal of joy and blessing. The letter doesn’t have to be long or well thought out, it needs only to come from your heart as the Holy Spirit will lead you. Encourage a friend that is suffering, rejoice with one who has received a blessing, share a personal concern for which you and the receiver of your letter may pray over. Begin the letter as does St. Paul, thanking God for this special person in your life and letting them know that you are praying for them. Most importantly of all, remind them that Jesus died for them on Good Friday, that they would be forever reconciled to God if they will put their faith in Him.

Deacon Leslie Arbegast
Ascension Anglican Church

March 12, 2020

Read Exodus 19

⁹ And the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.” When Moses told the words of the people to the LORD, ¹⁰ the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments ¹¹ and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. ¹³ No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.” ¹⁴ So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. ¹⁵ And he said to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.” ¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.

Not too long ago, I watched an interview with a famous football player. In the interview, he expressed an objection to the Christian faith. Primary was concern toward the eternal disposition of those who reject Christ. He stated, “What type of loving, sensitive, omnipresent, omnipotent being wants to condemn most of his beautiful creation to a fiery hell?” While there are a few issues that could be addressed, I believe the primary issue to be his incomplete understanding of the character of God.

This individual used four words to describe God. Loving, sensitive, omnipresent, and omnipotent. While these terms most certainly could be used to describe God, the one characteristic missing, and I believe fundamental in any discourse as it pertains to the attributes of God; would be one word, “Holy.”

In our reading for today, God gives Moses specific instructions as to how the people are to be prepared for what they are about to witness. Moses was to “consecrate them today and tomorrow and they were to wash their garments and on the third day, be ready.” After being set apart, the people were to prepare themselves to enter into the presence of the Lord. I then have to ask myself, “How am I any different than the Israelites?” Each Sunday as I come to gather with my brothers and sisters in Christ, have I truly prepared myself to come into the presence of a Holy God?

A few Sundays ago, prior to the service, I was sitting in my usual spot in the Sanctuary, making sure I had all of my logistics ready for service. It was then that a gentleman, a visitor, asked if it would be O.K. for him to kneel at the rail and pray before service. I told him, “Absolutely!” As he knelt at the rail, I wanted to thank him for reminding me to make sure that I had prepared my heart, not just my logistics to enter into God’s presence in worship.

But this is not just a Sunday thing. Every day with Jesus is a Holy Day. A day set apart to meet with him and to serve him. So, how do we prepare our hearts to walk in his presence each day?

May I suggest one way is through Morning Prayer. Whether it is the full Morning Prayer or the Family Devotionals, both found in the Book of Common Prayer. The point, of course, is not to check off an activity accomplished, but to spend time setting one's mind of Jesus and walking in his presence throughout the day. What we do on Sunday, as a community of believers, should be an extension of what we are already doing in our daily lives as individual believers.

As we prepare our hearts for Easter through observance of Lent, let us remember that Jesus, God's Only Begotten Son has consecrated us and has, himself, washed our garments in his blood. "How will we make ourselves ready this Sunday and every day to meet with God at the mountain?"

Deacon Ron Christolear
Trinity Anglican Church

March 13, 2020

Read Matthew 20:17-19

17 While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, ¹⁸‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; ¹⁹then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.’

In today’s reading, we find Jesus with his disciples as they travel through the Holy Land ministering to the needs of the people. As they were together, Jesus taught in parables, and shared with the people about the need for them to be ready to serve God; to labor in the field. I can just imagine what it must have been like to be with Him. He appears to teach and minister as He walks along. It’s as if it is just as natural for Him to teach parables and do miracles as to conduct casual conversation. I wonder if the apostles were always paying attention, since we have an unusual transition from the teaching of the Laborers in the Vineyard into a very serious and personal prediction. As they are walking up to Jerusalem, He draws the 12 aside from the others, and talks with them as they continue walking. He is clueing them in; this is actually the third time that he foretells his death to them, and He does so in a matter of fact way. Jesus is very clear and direct, stating that in Jerusalem He will be given over to the chief priests and scribes who will condemn Him to death; that He will be mocked, flogged and crucified, and (by the way) will be raised on the third day. Both parts of this talk would be very hard to process, and, it appears that the apostles did not really comprehend, in the moment, the seriousness of it. He predicts His death, and his resurrection within the same statement. This is obviously incredibly serious....very hard to hear. What does He mean?

He is comforting His followers while warning them about what will come in the days ahead. He illustrated what the Psalmist was pointing to in the encouragement of Psalm 33:22...that though it will be hard, and awful; He will suffer and die; but, the hope beyond hope will be realized as He returns to life. His love is steadfast, never failing, even while He is facing suffering and death. It is obvious that not all of His disciples were paying close attention to Him.

Our Gospel passage includes that the mother of James and John made her petition for her sons, and the others present must have cringed at the crassness and insensitivity of the request. I would hope that there would be at least a pause in the proceedings due to concern about Him and compassion in light of what He just told them. Obviously, this mother was more concerned about the future of her sons than about Jesus’s future. But, as the Psalmist wrote, “*Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you*”, the steadfast love and compassion of Jesus is shown. He did not react to her or to James and John as even the other disciples did; he steadfastly demonstrated His love and compassion.

What a Wonderful Savior! Even while informing His followers of His coming sacrifice. He has time to listen to our own personal requests and concerns. Obviously, the coming events were heavy on His mind, but, this demonstrates that no matter what He was facing, He was willing to listen to the concerns of the ones He came to save.

Deacon Skip Hill

Ascension Anglican Church

March 14, 2020

Read *Micah 7:14-15,18-20*

*He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot.
You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. Micah 7:19*

It is amazing that all of your sins have been taken away from you and cast into the depths of the sea! Every sinful thought, word, deed, desire, motivation, etc. has been taken away from you and fully dealt with. The idea of casting your sins into the depths of the sea provides comfort, that they are never coming back to be reunited with you. They are gone...forevermore! We know that this has been done through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ! Just as the Lord cast the Egyptians into the depths of the Red Sea (as judgment), so our Lord Jesus Christ willingly received that same baptism of judgment on your behalf, taking every single sin of yours into the depths of judgment. He took your sins right out into the mid-ocean of *Divine* pardon and grace.

You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. The deepest trench of the sea is found in the Pacific Ocean and is approximately 36,200 feet or about seven miles below sea level. That's how far God put away the sins of His people. With Jesus' death your sins were thrown into deepest pit of hell. Just as the Lord cast the Egyptians into the depths of the Red Sea (as judgment), so the Lord Jesus willingly received that same baptism of judgment on your behalf. But unlike what happened in the Red Sea, Christ Jesus rose from the dead! Because Jesus rose from the dead, you know that the Father accepted His sacrifice on your behalf, and this leads to the marvelous conclusion that all of your sins have been completely and finally dealt with through our Savior Jesus Christ.

Through His compassion He brought you His ever needed peace. The disciples, like you, were not in a state to provide their own inner peace, which is impossible, unless it is received from the Lord. When our Lord spoke in peace, He made peace because He is peace and His words are spirit, truth and life. But when you are right with God, you receive His peace by studying the Lord Himself. It is this peace that comes from looking into His face remembering the undisturbed condition that He had in every set of circumstances (II Corinthians 3:18).

God will give you a new revelation of His kindness in the valley of the shadow (Ps. 23:4). What are the days and experience that bother you most? Are they days of green pastures of absolute ease? No, they have their value; but further growth of character comes in the days of stress and thick fog.

God wants to take you into a place where He holds you absolutely, where difficult experiences no longer bother you. With this burden gone, your efforts are gone along with no self-conscious experience left, Jesus Christ becomes Lord of your life. This Lenten season you'll know that after you confess your sins, that they *have disappeared into the abyss of hell*, giving you His eternal peace.

Deacon Gregory Statezni
Trinity Anglican

March 15, 2020

Read *Matthew 21:23-end*

“And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” (Matthew 21:44) (ESV)

The stone is mentioned in previous verses, referring to the Psalm 118:22.

*The stone, that the builders rejected,
has become the cornerstone.
This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.*

As you walk the path to the Kingdom of God, you often come to more difficult parts of the path. There is no sun, but darkness. You are aware of it, and your concentration is increasing. As if you were hiking in the mountains, aware of the difficulties that are the part of the hike, you are really careful paying attention as you hike. You concentrate to avoid falling, yet, something falls on you. You want to make sure nothing falls on you, yet, you yourself fall.

However, you are not an enemy of God, you are not to be stoned as a punishment for your sins. But, at the same time, you are not able to resolve your situation by yourself. Christ Himself shall make sure you are not going to fall. Christ Himself shall make sure you are not going to be struck by the stone. This is about the final end of times, when we all stand before the Last Judgment of God.

When you experience a situation on your path to the Kingdom of God, that seems that you have fallen, or have been struck, and these states happen for sure, you may ask God through the Holy Spirit to inform you about the nature of the circumstances. Sometimes He does not give a direct answer, and manages amazing instances through which you may get the answer. Sometimes, you do not get the answer, and it is an opportunity to contemplate His presence in you.

You are His follower; the follower of the Crucified, and sometimes the pain from falling or being struck, brings you closer to the awareness of His Grace for you.

Glory to Him for your past, glory to Him for this time, glory to Him for the Eternity.

Fr. Steve Veselsky
Trinity Anglican Church
Missionary to Czech Republic

March 16, 2020

Read *Matthew 22:1-33*

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying; “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding feast for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the feast to tell them to come, but they refused to come.” (Matt. 22:1,2)

Have you ever been personally invited to a major formal event, with a sumptuous five-star “sit down” dinner provided? The one where your name is embossed upon a white card prominently, placed by your place setting, and no one is expected to be seated there except you! Quite literally the whole town is there, but your seat is conspicuously vacant. You are a “no show” and everybody notices it, especially your host. What would your host think? What would the one being feted think?

The king of heaven and earth, God the Father from all eternity, from everlasting to everlasting, desires to honor his only begotten son with a wedding feast, and his own people refused to attend and share in his great joy. The Lord Jesus made it quite clear in the telling of this parable among many others. God’s own chosen people were rejecting him and his son, and in the end, God would reject them. It is an ancient story, for we read in the First book of Samuel, when Israel asked the aged Samuel for a king, like all the other nations around them he was greatly displeased, but when he prayed to the Lord, the Lord answered, *“Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.” (1 Sam. 8:7).*

Israel’s parabolic rejection of their Lord’s invitation into his kingdom. Blessing and salvation opened the door to those of us on the outside of his covenant relationship with Israel. Their loss was our opportunity for gain as the king’s servants invited and gathered in everyone that could be found, to come to the king’s wedding feast. How absolutely wonderful it is to be invited by none other than the king of the universe, the Ancient of Days, to his heavenly banquet in honor of his son. And as with many celebrity functions, there is a dress code for admission. “Each invitee must be attired in their wedding garment or no admission allowed.” And what is that “wedding garment”? It is none other than the “righteousness of Christ”, which is what we acquire when we exchange our “filthy, sin-soaked rags” for his pure white robe of righteousness at the Cross.

This Lenten season, let us stir up a spirit of expectation and joy, knowing that there is a place of honor at his wedding feast for us, the *“bride of Christ”*. He is coming back for us that we may be where he is forever, for as it is written: *“Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.”* Then the angel said to me, *“Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’”* And he added, *“These are the true words of God.” (Rev.19:7-9)*

Deacon John La Mar
Trinity Anglican Church

March 17, 2020

Read Matthew 22:34—23:12

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36)

This gospel passage occurs in Matthew when Jesus is in the midst of being confronted by religious leaders, trying to trick or trap him with clever questions. So, earlier in Matthew 22 the Pharisees sent some of their disciples to try to trip Jesus up on the subject of paying taxes to Caesar (v15-22). Then, just before our passage, the Sadducees attempted to ensnare Jesus with a question about the resurrection of the dead (v23-33). And, of course, neither attempt proved successful for Jesus’ opponents. But now, in today’s gospel passage, we find the Pharisees hoping the third time will be the charm, as they send one of their own experts in God’s law to ask Jesus, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

In this instance, the Pharisees’ strategy is to make Jesus out to look like a religious liberal. They believe if they can get Jesus to pick just one law as the ‘greatest’ then he will appear to be diminishing the importance of all the rest of God’s laws. However, Jesus responds with words we’re all familiar with from our Sunday liturgy. He says, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (v37-40). And in responding this way, Jesus avoids the Pharisees’ trap by refusing to choose just one commandment from the Hebrew Scriptures to the exclusion of all others. And instead he chooses two commands that sum up the heart of all the commands in the Jewish law. After all, if one just aimed to keep the first commandment Jesus cites - “love the Lord your God...” - in doing so they would fulfill the first four of the Ten Commandments (“You shall have no other gods before me”, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image...”, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...”, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...”). Meanwhile, if one aimed to keep the second of these two greatest commandments - “love your neighbor as yourself” - this would fulfill the final six of the Ten Commandments.

But in addition to avoiding a trap with this response, Jesus also manages to expose these religious folks’ moral inadequacy, while at the same time highlighting his own moral supremacy. By invoking the concept of ‘love’, Jesus broadens the question of one’s moral purity beyond mere outward behaviors by making righteousness a matter of the heart and integrity. And this surely explodes any sense of self-righteousness or any of us; after all, none of us can assert we have loved God and our neighbor with anything close to perfection. And yet, there is one who would - who *has* - and that is Jesus. In going to the cross, Jesus *did* love God the Father with all his heart, soul, and mind - with his whole life - by remaining faithful to the Father’s will for his life even unto death (Mt 26:39). But Jesus also loved all of his neighbors to the fullest extent, by laying down his life for the world, for all humankind (Jn 3:16, Jn 15:13).

What makes this gospel passage so appropriate for the season of Lent is because it challenges us to do what the Pharisees could never bring themselves to do: to acknowledge our inadequacy to love as the Lord has called us to, in contrast to Jesus’ perfection in doing so. How appropriate that each Sunday this “Summary of the Law” is followed in our liturgy with the only appropriate response: of humbling ourselves with the plea “Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon

us. Lord, have mercy upon us.” But despite our incompetence in loving God and our neighbor(s), the Lord doesn’t intend for us to remain there. Rather, it is by humbling of ourselves and grasping once again how perfectly Jesus has loved us that we are empowered to love God and our neighbor to love as He does. It is from this posture that we can ask Jesus by His Spirit to help us do this. Will you ask Him for that today?

Fr. John Roberts

St. Matthias Anglican Church, Oakdale

March 18, 2020

Read Matthew 23:13-end

*“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.”
(Matthew 23:13)*

When I was a child, I often acted defiantly towards my mother. I would blatantly break one of the rules for the sake of trying to gain control and would find myself grounded for what I did. But when the sentence was given for my deeds, I would often seek to gain control even of that. Often a short list of restrictions would become a long one, chock-full of additional items that I had added onto myself in angrily pushing at the new boundaries within the confines of my punishment.

The Pharisees were particularly skilled in showing off their talents in living life within the confines of the law. They knew God’s regulations (and those imposed by their own order) inside and out. Nothing would keep them from entering the kingdom of heaven because they were so good at being good. But they were lacking in the most important thing, love. They were not motivated by love for God and for their neighbors. They had piled up such a height of regulations that they had forgotten the very purpose of the law, to love God with their whole hearts and to love their neighbors as themselves.

Jesus knew this only too well as he saw what was inside their hearts. They were “*whitewashed tombs . . . full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness*” (Matthew 23:27). All their efforts in attaining the kingdom of God had actually pushed them further away from the One who was going to bring it into their very midst.

Yet even in this harsh rebuke, we see God’s mercy and love. Jesus is not content with allowing them to continue in their chains of legalism and to bind others along with themselves. Instead, He shares this warning with them. Seven times He says, “*Woe to you,*” calling them to turn away from their ways of vanity, of self-love and pride in their own works of righteousness. He calls to them to let go of their control over their own lives and fates and to lay it down at the foot of the cross.

How do you seek to control your own punishment? Your own sentencing from God? Are you able to hear the pronouncement of freedom and love that Christ has offered to you on the cross? What areas of your life are still subject to the legalism of the Pharisees, keeping aspects of your life outside the gates of God’s kingdom? Jesus is calling for you and me to lay them at the foot of the cross, to trust in the power of His blood and to be set free from our own chains of control in our lives.

Deacon Steve Braun
Trinity Anglican Church

March 19, 2020

Read Matthew 1:1-28

“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Matthew 1:20

Joseph’s whole world had been torn apart, or so he thought. He was all set to marry a woman of high character and, I would like to think, lovely to look at. Whatever her physical attractions were, her inner beauty surely shined through her. Joseph must have thought Mary would be the very best wife he could possibly have. And then the awful news that she was with child. How could such a thing happen? Joseph must have been deeply hurt to say the least. He could have had Mary stoned to death. But Joseph graciously decides to divorce her quietly. I doubt if I would have been so charitable. God chose Joseph to be surrogate father to his Son. Joseph must have been a man of high character to be chosen for such an important role. And we see this clearly in his decision to deal compassionately with the woman he believes has betrayed him.

When we are betrayed; when our world seems to be crumbling around us, how do we react? Joseph give us an example of how we need to reject revenge and rely on compassion and mercy. Joseph faced ridicule from his friends and neighbors. Many would have laughed at him behind his back or even to his face. And still he chose the higher path. All of us face many temptations, and it is easy to rationalize wrong choices. Joseph reminds us that the hard choices are in the best in the long run.

But of course Joseph was wrong about Mary. Understandably wrong to be sure. No one would believe such a thing was from God unless God told you otherwise. And so an angel delivers a message to Joseph. His torn-apart world is suddenly put back together. Often times we misinterpret the signs in our own lives. We think our world has been torn apart by some seemingly disastrous event. Often times it is difficult to see God in the midst of our troubles. Joseph certainly didn’t see God in the midst of the most unwelcome news he had ever heard. And then God sent him a message. And his world came back together.

When we come to God in prayer, he can put our world back together again. Our troubles may not disappear. Joseph’s troubles did not disappear, they increased. But God saw him and his family through those troubles. God can see us through our troubles when we come to him in humility with contrite hearts.

Fr. David Brown
St. Jude’s in the Mountains Anglican Church

March 20, 2020

Read Ephesians 2:1-10

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” Ephesians 2:4-5

There is a scene in the delightful movie *The Princess Bride* in which Westley, the hero, is brought to Miracle Max to see if he can be saved. Upon hearing that Westley is dead, Miracle Max asks if he is dead, or just “mostly dead.” According to Miracle Max, there’s a big difference - “mostly dead is still slightly alive.”

What Paul is teaching in this passage is that we are all, in our sins and trespasses, dead. Not mostly dead and therefore slightly alive, but dead and unable to save ourselves.

Do we really believe this? Do we really believe that we cannot save ourselves? Do we really believe that we cannot work hard enough or do enough good to earn God’s saving merit? Or do we, on a functional level, really live as though we are “slightly alive” all on our own, seeking to live in our own strength and without God’s help?

This is one of the hardest messages of Scripture. Left on our own, we cannot save ourselves; we are dead in our sins and trespasses. But it is a message matched, or more accurately, exceeded, by God’s grace. “But God...made us alive together with Christ...” God, in His mercy and grace, has rescued us from our sins and made us alive with Jesus!

Do we really believe this? Do we really believe that everything we need for salvation has been given to us in Jesus? Do we really believe that God we are now alive in Christ, no longer slaves to sin and death?

As the season of Lent progresses, the hard news of our being dead begins to anticipate the good news that God has made us alive – the message of Easter. We are meant to examine our hearts and allow God to show us where death still reigns in us, but we are also meant to allow His love to absolutely overwhelm us and give us peace.

All too often, we have a hard time believing the whole truth: that left to ourselves we are truly dead, but in Christ we are fully alive. Sometimes we refuse to believe that we are completely dead without Jesus. Sometimes we are content to live in our own strength, apart from God, as those who are only “slightly alive.”

Miracle Max brought Westley back to life, but only because he was “mostly dead.” How much more amazing are we who, though fully dead, have been made fully alive in Christ! May we never settle for living as those who are slightly alive, but may we live and rest in the incredible news of God’s saving mercy!

Fr. Karl Dietze
Trinity Anglican Church

March 21, 2020

Read Matthew 25:14-30

“For to everyone who has, will more be given, and he will have an abundance. For the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” (Matthew 25:29)

The Parable of the Talents is placed between the Parable of the Ten Virgins and the Final Judgment in the 25th Chapter of Matthew.

We need to be cautious. Parables normally teach a moral principle. In biblical times, a talent wasn't thought of as a natural ability as it is today, but a measure of weight. The servants were given these talents (a talent was worth approximately \$1,000) and were expected to invest them for the master's benefit. When the master returned, there was an accounting from the three servants.

The first servant (who received 5 talents) doubled his talents. The second servant (who received two) doubled his talents. The third servant hid his talent in the ground for fear of the master's anger if it was lost.

The story implies that the master expected the servants to invest their talents. The first two did and were commended by the master for their faithfulness. “Well done, good and faithful servant.” (*Mat 25:21,23*) The third servant who had received the one talent told the master that he had been afraid and had hidden his talent. The master harshly criticized that servant and gave his one talent to the first servant.

So, what is the meaning of this parable? The Lord has given us natural gifts and we, as professing Christians, are expected to exercise those gifts not for our own benefit, but to the benefit and glory of God.

During this Lenten season, instead of abstaining from or giving up something, consider stepping out and taking a risk for Jesus! You will glorify God and He will transform you.

C.S. Lewis puts it this way: It must be a hard thing for an egg to become a bird; but it is a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while it is still an egg. We are like eggs, today, and we either must be hatched, or go bad.” (Lewis, C.S., *“The Four Loves”*)

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