

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Lent 1-C; 10 March 2019
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
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The Great Litany and Temptation

In nomine...

I. Intro

The “Great” in “The Great Litany,” contrary to what you might think, doesn’t just mean “long.” Some might find “The Long Litany” to have a certain kind of accuracy about it, just like “The Long Vigil of Easter” or “The Long Silence” between Compline and Morning Prayer in a monastery or on retreat. But these Great things aren’t Great just for the sake of being long.

Or maybe I should reframe this conversation by pointing out that sometimes, there are no shortcuts. Sometimes learning a practice, a habit, a way of living, cannot be done in any other way beyond repetition and rehearsal. The entire Appleby-Wineberg family can tell you about the *hours* of daily practice needed to maintain a quality set of lips for playing the trumpet. Most of us can remember the practice it took to develop the skills and habits required to be a competent automobile driver. And the fact that you are here, in church on a Sunday, means that you are involved in the acquisition of another habit: the habit of living in the presence of God.

II. Thesis

We sang the Great Litany today because today is the first Sunday in Lent. The Great Litany teaches us how to pray for many things, but it is centered around asking for God’s mercy, God’s deliverance, and God’s grace. The Great Litany is a response to sin: sin in the world in general, sin in our own communities, and sin in our own hearts.

And here’s the interesting thing. You’ve heard this from me before, and you will certainly hear it again in the future: Sin is not so much about particular things that you should or shouldn’t do, but about the ways we hurt one another and break relationship. Sin is less a question of *what* you do, and more a question of *how* you do it.

Take, as an example, our Gospel reading this morning. We always begin Lent with the Temptation of Jesus. But what was Jesus tempted to do? To make bread! Can you believe it? The devil was tempting Jesus to make bread! And Jesus, mighty and victorious, turned him down. Let this be a lesson to you! I hope that I may never come over to any of your houses and find out you have been making bread. Just to be safe, I suggest you get rid of all flour, yeast, and bread pans. And don't get me started about bread machines: the work of the devil!

What were we talking about? Jesus was tempted to make bread.

Satan also tempted Jesus to political power. The Jewish people were expecting a Messiah who would be a conquering king, overpowering other nations and establishing a global kingdom.

The last temptation was to religious power: to the prerogatives of divinity, to excite peoples' worship and obedience.

You'll note that all these things Jesus was invited to do, Jesus actually did later on. But he did them in a different way than that suggested by the Devil. Jesus made bread in the desert to feed not himself but the crowds that had come to hear him.

Jesus liberated God's people not just from Rome, but from every dominion that would oppress them, every evil thing that together we might call "sin," establishing the Kingdom of God which will outlast every human government and power.

Finally, Jesus demonstrated what it meant to reign as the divine, as God in the flesh, and shockingly it meant not demonstrating invulnerability and pride, but the ultimate humility of painful crucifixion. God reigns from the cross, not to dominate, control, and condemn, but to love, to be present and open and vulnerable.

The tempter, at his craftiest, invited Jesus to do the things that Jesus was destined to do. But he invited Jesus to take short cuts, to do them in ways that seemed easy and logical, but were in conflict not with the "what" of God's plan, but the "how." Sin is less about the *what* and more about the *how*.

III. Good News

Fascinatingly, all our other scriptures today, to go along with the temptation of Jesus, are about liturgy. The reading from Deuteronomy is especially beautiful and evocative for me: *A wandering Aramean was my ancestor*. Deuteronomy 26 is describing a liturgy for the feast of first-fruits. The fact of cultivating and harvesting the promised land is not in dispute as right or wrong. But there's a right way to do it, and it involves remembering that land as a gift of God and claiming one's connection to the whole history of God's people. It involves connecting the harvester's present abundance and joy with larger narrative of God caring for God's people.

Isn't this just like what we do each week with the Holy Eucharist? We read scripture describing ancient and often strange events. We practice this thing we call a meal but which is different from any other meal we eat during the week. And in doing this we connect our own stories, our own present, to the history of God and God's people. We become a part of that narrative, and the ups and downs of our own lives take on new meaning as the latest chapters in the history of God's Kingdom.

So in Romans today we read that "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe (*credideris*) in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Confession? Creed? Liturgy!

Even our Psalm speaks of dwelling in the shelter of the most High, calling upon God's name and relying upon God for our wellbeing. It might be talking about going to church!

Liturgy, the things we do together at church, shapes the *how* that gives meaning to the *what* we do. Liturgy, the repetition of words and actions day by day, week by week, and year by year, is meant to seep into our bones, to mold our hearts, to provide deep channels for our thoughts to run in, and to acculturate us to the Kingdom of God to which it points. Some liturgy does that by being present and sinking almost below the level of thought: like saying "God bless you" when someone sneezes. And some liturgy does that by standing out, memorably, like the Great Litany or the Great Vigil of Easter. Or next week when we will sing the lovely hymn, "St. Patricks' Breastplate" which also forms the core of a beautiful and slightly trippy novel by Madeline L'Engle.

IV. Invitation

Liturgy isn't the only way to approach God. 10,000 hours of liturgical practice isn't a guaranteed ticket into heaven. Liturgy is empty without good works and a warm heart. But liturgy is the school of faith, an ongoing course in Kingdom-of-God living. Every human being practices liturgies, both intentional and unconscious. As Christians we choose some of those liturgies to connect us to God. As Episcopalians, liturgy is a special charism that we share with the world. Just listen to the next wedding you hear at any other church, and see how much of it comes straight from our Book of Common Prayer.

The temptation is to go through life taking what looks like the easiest, most direct path. But in the Kingdom of God, things look a bit different. As human beings immersed in a world that insists on its own way, we need help and support in order to adopt an alternative perspective, a better way through life. The Great Litany is just one of many practices handed down to us, things that help shape us and form in us the habit of living in God's Kingdom.

So we do these things, we do liturgy and we sing the Great Litany, not to make God happy, not to earn some kind of merit in God's eyes. We practice them for minutes or even hours each day because we believe that through them God changes us. In them we hear God's invitation. And as our worldview is increasingly filtered through lenses shaped by godly habits, we will come to understand the logic and contours of God's Kingdom. In so doing, we will discover what was true all along: we are at home, already living in the presence of the God who loves us.

And that is pretty Great!

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