

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 18-A (6 September 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2020-09-05 Sat 13:19>

Collect

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Exodus 12:1-14, Psalm 149, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

1 Agree – own strength vs. God’s mercy

God resists the proud who confide in their own strength.

I see this in my own life. Try as hard as I might, I still fall down on a regular basis. Figuratively more than literally. I make mistakes, I’m slow to understand, I get hooked emotionally by other people’s problems. Because what I have inside, my own strength, often it seems it’s not enough.

What is the alternative offered us by our collect? Instead of pride, boasting in our own strength, we may rely upon and even boast of God’s *mercy*. Instead of living out of my own power and independence, I can live out of God’s power, out of my dependence upon God, a dependence I share with every other creature of God. And as an added benefit, I discover God’s mercy is something that I have in common, in agreement, with others. So I wonder: what if that was what God intended from the beginning?

2 Passover

Our first reading today is from Exodus. It is from the middle of *the* story of the Hebrew Bible: the Passover, God’s deliverance of God’s people from death. The Passover was the interpretive lens used by the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, by all the prophets and the wisdom writers. It was the interpretive lens used by Jesus to understand his own life and death and resurrection. It’s no coincidence that the central holy day of the Christian year, the day we celebrate in fact every Sunday, is Easter: the day of the Resurrection of Jesus. That is the central fact of our faith as well.

Passover is God's miraculous *saving* work, redeeming God's people from slavery and oppression and setting them free to be a new community, called out from the powers of the world to live as God's community. Our reading from Exodus is concerned with exactly one thing: remember, God says. Remember what is happening tonight. Remember what God has done for you. Don't go thinking you've done it yourself, don't go boasting in your own strength. Instead maintain this holiday, remember this celebration, this cornerstone of your liturgical calendar, to keep in mind, to remember the mercy of God acting on your behalf. Remember: *this* is what you're to boast about.

This is the fundamental story of the Jews. It is the fundamental story of the Christians. The story on which every other story is based. Not just religious stories, not just Bible stories: *all* stories and *all* ideas. The story on which all our arguments, interpretations, understandings, opinions, and decisions are based. *This* story, not any other, is the foundation on which we base our pride and in which we make our boast. *This* story is the one thing on which we can agree. Because this story is the whole basis of our community. This is the story we remember in our baptism, in our celebration of Holy Eucharist, in our observance of the Church Year.

3 Our community

And so as our elections approach, this is the time of year when candidates and parties are making their cases and when ordinary people, you and I, are forming our opinions and even arguing about them. This is normal, the tug and tussle of democracy as practiced in our country for 250 years. Sometimes arguments can get heated, and that's part of the game. But when there's no common story, when our opponents come to be characterized as totally "other," then things get dangerous. Then we begin faltering in our capacity to see and to sympathize with the humanity, hurts and hopes, the good will and worthiness of those who see differently from us. Then conversation turns to verbal battles, intended not to confide or convince but to dismiss and demoralize. We can see where this has led in recent weeks in our country: to violence and to death.

But sisters and brothers, that's not who we are as Christ's church. We have something we agree on. We have gathered together, we have committed to live together in community, because we are committed not to a building or to clergy or to a denomination. We are committed to the story of the Passover, the story of the Resurrection, the story of God's powerful love that transcends whatever empire in which we find ourselves living and invites us to citizenship in God's eternal kingdom.

4 Symphony

I'm a bit of a language nerd. I noticed in this week's Gospel reading, where Jesus is talking about conflict among believers, that the word "agree" as in "if two of you agree on earth about anything" is actually the word *symphony*.

A symphony, as we use the word today, is a piece of music, played by a large group of instruments. They're not all the same instrument, and they don't all play the same notes. That's not what it means for them to agree.

But agreeing in a symphony doesn't mean they each go off and play something suited only to their particular instrument and the taste of that particular musician, does it?

The members of a symphony have chosen not to confide in their own strength, but to make their boast in the mercy of the conductor, who takes that common story, that common score of music, and leads them each to play their own parts so that what is heard is not unison but chords, dramatic tensions, and harmonic resolutions. Different instruments, called to play different lines and different approaches to the central musical ideas. The fullness of the piece can only be heard when they're all present, doing their part.

I think it's rather beautiful that St. Thomas', most years, chooses to put on a Ham & Oyster Dinner on election night. Because you know we're all voting in different ways at the booth that day. But the display of agreement, of pulling together to do one big thing that day, is stunning. It's a symphony of agreement. It's a remembering of what we have in common. Together we are boasting in God's mercy.

5 Calling

Our calling as a church is not to live in unison, to agree with one another about everything. Our calling, our foundational premise, is that we agree about one thing: we boast in God's mercy, that mercy shown dramatically at the Passover and in all its fullness in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the son of God.

That is the foundation for our thoughts, the basis on which we play a symphony of words, actions, and arguments striving to bring to expression the reality of God in our lives every day. It is in the harmonies, the tensions even, that the glory of God which transcends the capacity of any of us will become manifest. This is something our neighbors are desperately asking for in these hyper-partisan times.

As we remember to make our boast in God's mercy, we will discover that our habit of love for one another and for neighbor, the power of God at work within us, will save us from despair and make the world around us a better place.

Amen.