

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 24-B (17 October 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2021-10-16 Sat 16:57>

Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Job 38:1-7, (34-41), Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b, Hebrews 5:1-10, Mark 10:35-45

1 The request

“James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”¹

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I can relate to the story in our Gospel reading today. The way I phrased it as a child to my own parents was, “If I ask you something, will you promise to say yes?” It didn’t work for me, and it didn’t work for James or John. They asked Jesus this same question and then, I have to believe, Jesus chuckled. Maybe he smirked a knowing smile. Jesus knew exactly what James and John were about to ask. Really, it’s the same question that was being asked by the rich man in last week’s Gospel reading. These people have a sense of what Jesus is offering them, but they’re not dreaming big enough. They’re trying to contain Jesus’ message in categories they understand: categories of wealth or status or recognition.

But Jesus was patient. Jesus let them play out their little game, stating their request very plainly. Just so they could hear themselves and realize what was going on. Then Jesus used even this selfishness, and the chagrin of the other apostles, to proclaim the good news, the Gospel. Jesus tells his disciples, and anyone else who will listen, that they *already have* more worth, more value, more status because of God’s love for them than anything they can imagine or compare with. But by clinging to a lesser status, by clinging to the standards of “the nations” around them, the standards of being in charge, being the boss, and getting their own way, they are actually *depriving* themselves of their true and greater status as God’s own possession.

¹Mark 10.35 NRSV

2 Church - a level playing field

We are the inheritors of the gifts of the apostles, and as we gather week by week to hear the apostles' teachings, we gather as church. Church is an unusual community in our world today. In a world that segregates us by age, class, wealth, education, ability, race, and gender, church is the one place where we all mix together again. There may be lots of different people at a Phillies game, but only certain people are shelling out \$50 for a ticket. At church, we *all* come together, not just to sit in proximity to one another – though that is also critical – but to relate to one another, to share our lives with one another, to support one another and to care for one another. Church is like that because there is exactly one criterion by which we are measured when we come to church: the question of whether God loves you. And the answer, by the way, for every single person, no matter who you are, where you've come from, or what you've done, is Yes: God loves you – deeply and completely. We who gather as church are the community of the baptized, those who have signified in that simple rite our acceptance of God's love and our acknowledgment that *that* is the single fact about us that matters more than anything else. In our baptism we have remembered that there are no hierarchies among us, that we are all connected on a level playing field, and the most important fact about each of us is that fact that we all absolutely have in common: the fact of God's love for us.

What is Jesus telling James and John in his response to them? First of all, he's telling them that hierarchy among believers is not a thing. Status and power and authority for anyone other than God is simply irrelevant in the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God you have been freed from such things, freed from the tyrants and the officious authorities that plague you everywhere else. So, James and John, don't you go trying to introduce that broken game of status and power into the community of God's people. It doesn't belong here. It doesn't work. All of God's people, James and John included, have been freed from the tyrants. If you go acting like a tyrant, even just aspiring to be a tyrant, then you're going to miss out on the joys of the Kingdom of God, blindly looking past it when even you're standing right in the middle of it!

3 Jesus' Example

Of course, that's exactly what was happening with James and John – and with you and me today. We can still look around and make distinctions on the basis of wealth, or education, or jobs. We can't help it! Our bodies are well-trained to pick out hints of age, skin color, body shape, and gender expression. Sometimes we interpret a suit or a collar as a symbol of hierarchical power. Even in the church sometimes, the right haircut can make a difference.

But these things shouldn't matter, should they? These kinds of differences are the things we all strive to put behind us. We fail constantly, like the apostles, and Jesus keeps inviting us to try again. Church is the community where we stick together anyhow, despite our failures. We recite our baptismal covenant again, and we continue trying to actually live into a new kind of relationship where we all measure one another by a single yard-stick: by God's love for us. Because God loves all of us, each of us, infinitely well.

4 Stewardship

This month is stewardship month at St. Thomas'. I always approach stewardship from two points of view. First of all, we give to God because it's good for us, healthy and necessary for our souls. That's the main thing always

to keep in mind about giving.

Secondly, we give to the institutional church because that's where we find a training ground, preparing us for the Kingdom of God, and companions to help us along our journey there. We give to the church, each according to our means, so that we can continue to be this strange, unusual, community in the world, a community striving to free ourselves from hierarchies and from ambitions for power over others which prevent us from receiving God's authoritative love for us ruling over all. We give to the church because this institution is holding a space in our lives and in our communities where we can leave behind all the competition, striving, judgment and prejudices, and come and work together to encounter God's level playing field. Giving to the church is an important way that we love our neighbors, surrendering our own power and authority in order to receive something bigger than we can even imagine.

Church is the place where, as we begin to wiggle free from our enslavement to possessions, to social standing and status, to all the cultural forces that war against your soul, church is the place where we begin to discover our true status and stature as God's beloved. We begin to understand ourselves as citizens of God's kingdom. Church is where you discover that *you matter*.

James and John went on to become well-known apostles who have nurtured the faith of many millions. This was not because of their status in a hierarchy, but because of what they learned from Jesus. They spoke and wrote of the love of they encountered in Jesus, inviting others to know Jesus, too.

On the cross Jesus died for you. No matter who you are or what you've done, Jesus died for you. That's how important you are to God. As you support the work of St. Thomas' with a pledge, you are helping remind these people seated right around you, and those living around us in our larger community, that they, too, are loved by God. That is one of the most important things any of us can do in life.

Amen.