



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Third Sunday After Trinity, June 24th, 2012

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

There's nothing that the ordinary Joe finds more entertaining than seeing the smug and self-satisfied among us exposed as frauds and hypocrites. There is, after all, something decidedly comic – cruelly comic, in fact – about seeing prideful folks with inflated egos cut down to size.

There's not a word for this sort of pleasure in English. The Germans, however, call it *schadenfreude*. It means taking pleasure in destroying things – everything from breaking a child's toy to blowing up a building to destroying a person's character.

Nothing is more likely to inspire *schadenfreude* than the discovery that some Holy Joe has feet of clay. Doubtless it is often richly deserved – especially in cases when people have behaved as if they alone have a lock on God's the truth. Sadly, when Christian leaders fall from grace, it is also a tragedy for the Faith. Not only does it undermine the laity's trust in what is contemptuously called “organized religion”, it also provides ammunition to atheists and secularists seeking to discredit the faith with claims the Church is corrupt. Moreover it is frequently cited as proof that sin is not evil, but simply a matter of differing but equally legitimate tastes..

Things haven't changed much over the years. Today's reading from St. Luke's Gospel – the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin – begins with the words: "Then drew near unto him [Jesus] all the publicans and sinners for to hear him." And the reason they were doing so is that he had just most amusingly denounced a whole bunch of Holy Joes – the scribes and Pharisees – as frauds and hypocrites.

It wasn't that the publicans and sinners were particularly friendly disposed towards Jesus. It was just human nature. There's nothing that dedicated sinners love more than hearing one bible-thumping parson denounce a whole bunch of others. The Pharisees and their religious lawyers, the scribes, routinely denounced folks who preferred the more civilized lifestyles of the Romans and Greeks as sinners and it was a pleasure to see the religious right get its comeuppance.

Initially, of course, they were not disappointed. Jesus had denounced the Pharisees for pedantically observing the letter of the law while grotesquely flouting its spirit. Then, in the passage from St. Luke's Gospel appointed for today's Eucharist, Jesus assures them God is constantly reaching out to people despised by the Holy Joes – folks such as publicans and sinners -- and seeking to bring them into the fold of his church.

But having assured them that God loved them, he didn't shrink from pointing out in glorious Technicolor their own glaring shortcomings. The portrait of a sinner in the Parable of the Prodigal -- which follows immediately after Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin -- is scarcely a flattering picture of people like publicans and sinners. In fact, they look just as idiotic and empty-headed as the hypocritical Holy Joes -- even more stupid in fact.

The prodigal son, for example, doesn't realize what a terrible situation he has gotten himself even when he's sitting in a pig pen, up to his neck in pig manure. It's not until he is actual dining on pig's swill that it occurs to him that even his father's most menial workers are having a better time of things than he is. In other words, it is only when he has reached the absolute depth of degradation that he decides he would be an awful lot better off at home.

Jesus' message is that we are all in deep trouble, and for much the same reasons. The hypocritical Holy Joes are in trouble because, in their pride, they presume to imagine that they are totally in tune with the mind of God: that their thoughts are his thoughts and that their ways are his ways.

The publicans and sinners are in trouble for their very similar sense of pride. They might not have regarded themselves as God's personal representatives on earth. But this is only because they either did not believe in his existence or because they believed he was so uninvolved in the universe he created that he didn't care if the standards of behavior he has laid down for human beings were routinely flouted.

But hypocrites or publicans and sinners, God prescribes exactly the same remedy for all of us. The reason for this is that -- hypocrites and publican and sinner -- our sin is actually the same. Both are sins occasioned by pride and arrogance.

Hypocrites or publicans and sinners -- all of us are in the same boat. Each of us needs to recognize and repent our faults, and accept the helping hand God stretches out to us. All of us are equally in need of the forgiveness God so freely offers us.

The communion epistles for the Second and Third Sundays After Trinity explain what we need to do to avoid the pitfalls Jesus warns us about in the Gospel lessons. These passages from the First Epistles General of St. John and St. Peter actually teach the same lesson. They urge us to cultivate the virtue of humility -- the first and foremost of all the Christian virtues.

It's hard to imagine a lesson more out of keeping with our age than this one. How many times, for example, have you heard anybody in the secular world advocate cultivating the virtue of humility. The answer, I'd venture to guess, is never.

If there is one quality our young people are constantly being urged to develop it is a sense of pride. All youthful ills -- whether they be ignorance, violence or pure brute barbarity -- the universal panacea is seen as an improved sense of self-esteem.

Friends, this is not what the Bible teaches. The Book of Proverbs tells us: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Indeed, when we read our history books we can see that a vast majority of the tragedies that have afflicted mankind can be lain at the door of human pride.

But, you know, the late 20th Century doesn't have a monopoly on the equating pride with strength and virtue and humility with cravenness and weakness. Yet there is nothing weak-kneed and namby-pamby about humility.

Humility is strength. Humility enables us to cut through the vainglorious psycho-babble and see ourselves as we really are. Humility, in other words, is a reality check. And what the apostles are telling us is a strong dose of reality is the only effective remedy for hypocrisy, self-indulgence and stubborn pride -- the root of all sinful behavior. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.