



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Sixth Sunday After Trinity, July 15th, 2012

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

The most accurate measuring instrument in creation is a child's eye. That, at least, is my opinion – one based on years of close observation. I'm sure most folks with kids would agree. It doesn't matter how carefully you slice a chocolate birthday cake, one little tyke is bound to howl: "Her piece is bigger than mine." And, you know what? The child is right. The other kid's slice is bigger: microscopically bigger; four or five crumbs bigger; but bigger nonetheless.

It's all right to chuckle about this, but the fact of the matter is that the propensity to measure stays with us throughout our lives. It seems hard wired into our humanity – part of our nature. To be sure, it's not usually pieces of chocolate cake that adults measure – though I have noticed that the biggest pieces tend to go first. But who's measuring? Me? No, definitely not! I don't care about such petty things. Well, not very much anyway.

No. The things that adults measure are generally much more important than pieces of cake. We measure the size of our houses against the homes of our siblings. We measure the cost of the cars in our garages against price tag on the new vehicles next door. We measure the amount in our pay packets against salaries earned by our co-workers. And we would be wrong to imagine we do not stoop to measuring the petty, truly unimportant things in life. There is nothing more human than the way we measure our selves favorably against the people we meet: in terms of looks, intelligence, wit (by no means the same things as intelligence); education (by no means the same thing as learning or wisdom), wealth – and virtue.

Virtue? Oh, indeed! Virtue is one of the things we most frequently measure – and especially in church . . . Because it is in church that we are compelled to examine the state of our souls. And, if we undertake this exercise seriously, we invariably find our selves wanting.

This helps explain why church is becoming increasingly unpopular these days. It is never a pleasant experience confront the reality of one's shortcomings. Thus, it ought to be unsurprising that in an age when self-esteem – deserved or undeserved – is a paramount necessity that an increasingly popular way of dealing with one's shortcomings is to avoid facing them all together. It's the Scarlet O'Hara method of handling sin: "Fiddle-di-dee. I'll think about that tomorrow."

The traditional way of dealing with personal shortcomings (notice I didn't say sins. Other people commit sins. Our personal sins are so minor they are best classified as shortcomings. But I digress . . .) As I was saying, the traditional way of dealing with personal shortcomings is to acknowledge them before God, assure him you are adopting a program to eradicate them, and, then, to take comfort in the fact that your sins are quite minor in comparison with those of the sinner across the aisle.

Measuring sin is one of the issues Jesus is dealing with into today's reading from St. Matthew's Gospel. It is a passage from what is popularly known as the Sermon on the Mount. Ironically, it kicks off with a series of statements against which many folks are inclined to measure themselves:

The Beatitudes. You remember, “Blessed the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, etc.”

(In my youth I reviewed the lot and realized, unhappily, that none of the qualities Jesus was taking about seemed to apply to me. I wasn’t poor in spirit. I didn’t have anything to mourn about. I couldn’t honestly say that I hungered and thirsted after righteousness because I couldn’t honestly say I was all that pure in heart. I was too big for boys of my age to persecute me. In the end I decided I could get in through the peacemaking and mercy loophole. Thanks to my size I was rarely involved in schoolyard brawls and I simply wasn’t interested in bullying other children.)

But measuring our virtues is not the purpose of the exercise. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is explaining to us that it doesn’t matter how virtuous we are, we can never hope to achieve God’s level of holiness. He says that even if, we manage to keep all of God’s commandments – something, even the Pharisee rabbis of Jesus’ day agreed was utterly impossible – we would still far short by God’s standards.

God did not give us his laws to eradicate sin; to enable us to become perfect. He gave them to us because we are, by nature, sinners. As we cannot change this because of the “hardness of our hearts,” God’s are designed to enable us to live more peaceably with our neighbors.

Jesus’ message is that even if we obey the very letter of the Law – something the Pharisees tried meticulously to do – it will not save us. This is what he means when he says: “Except you righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees ye shall in no case enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This was terrifying news for his listeners – especially the Pharisees They might seem to get a raw deal in the New Testament, but by human standards, they were admirable people. They led active religious lives. They prayed and studied the bible daily. They fasted at least twice a week and gave generously to beggars and charitable causes. They tithed everything they owned scrupulously to the Temple owned – down to the most insignificant leaf of mint in their kitchens.

Nor did they regard themselves exclusively as “Chosen People.” They were at least as conscientious about their duty to spread their as Christians today. They eagerly shared God’s message with the gentiles, and warmly welcomed them into their congregations as inquirers and converts. Jesus was not greatly exaggerating when he claimed they would travel to the ends of the earth to make a convert.

It must have been a shock for the disciples – not to mention “the publicans and sinners” the most righteous, pious and charitable people in the Land of Judah didn’t stand a chance of making it into the Kingdom of Heaven. It was bit like Christians hearing they need to be more pious than St. Paul more charitable than Mother Theresa in order to get to heaven.

But Jesus isn’t talking about human standards. He is explaining why we need him as our Saviour. He is pointing out that it is impossible for us to love our fellow men as freely and fully as God loves us. God’s standards are so immeasurably high, he says, they are quite literally beyond our comprehension. By God’s standard, for example, we don’t need to do people harm to incur God’s wrath. The simple act of getting angry with another person is enough to consign us to hell. Even the slightest feelings of resentment against another person are enough to earn us damnation.

This is an impossibly high standard for even the most high-minded of people. The human lot is aptly described by St. Paul when he complains he finds himself quite unable to do things he desperately wants to do and constantly doing things he utterly despises.

Our complete inability to achieve God’s standards of holiness comes as no surprise to Jesus. He, after all, has shared our humanity. He knows exactly what we are like from personal experience. His message in today’s Gospel reading is actually one of comfort, not condemnation. He is telling us he knows there is no way we can hope to meet God on equal terms. And in laying down so explicitly his divine standards of holiness, he is explaining why we need him as our mediator before God’s throne and promising salvation to every one of us who seeks it from him. *AMEN.*