



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday October 12, 2014 - Trinity 17

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

The passage selected for the Sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:

“Whoever shall exalt himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”

In the Gospel this morning Jesus gives us a warning against pride. It is good functional social advice for His time, and it remains sound advice for our own. Be wary of your pride. Don't presume to be the most honored guest and grab the best seat at the banquet. It is mortifying to be singled out to move down the table, away from the host and discover in front of all your friends that you are not the favored guest, but merely at the fringe of the social circle. Conversely, what a heart-warming discovery it is to be singled out after you humbly take the least place, and to be brought forward and seated at the right hand of the host, signifying the great love He has for you. We all understand the practical application of this warning as a proverb.

Jesus is very serious when He teaches us about pride. Pride is the root of all evil, and has been since our beginning. As much as picking the fruit of the Tree of Life was a sin of disobedience, it was even more truly a sin of pride. The devil appealed to Adam and Eve's desire to be like God, to have His power. It wasn't the taste of the fruit they wanted, it was the power of the fruit. They wanted to put their desire for knowledge above obedience to God.

Throughout the Old Testament, this fundamental sin is repeated again and again. The descendants of Noah try to build a tower to heaven so they can get there on their own terms. Saul's prideful disregard for God's will costs His kingdom. David's affair with Bathsheba isn't just a sin of lust, at root it is a sin of pride, that as king, he is above the Law of God, and can rationalize whatever he wants. By the time we get to the first century, the Pharisees have hijacked Judaism and converted it from being the servant and blessing to all people, which is promised to Abraham, to a religion of the elite within Israel, excluding even the

Jews who fail to have the means to the pride of the Pharisees.

Jesus chastises these Pharisees throughout the Gospel for their pride. They set their pride in keeping the law above the heart of the Law, which demands they put others before themselves. You should love God above all else, with all your heart and soul and mind, and Jesus shows them that the love of God is manifested in caring for His people. The Pharisees would pull their own ox from a ditch on the Sabbath, but would never consider dirtying their hands by caring for the unfortunate. Instead they parade around on the Sabbath showing off their religious dedication and false holiness.

The same harsh lesson is at the heart of the parable about the prideful prayer of the Pharisee and the humble prayer of the Publican. It is a timely parable to remember because we have just celebrated the Feast of St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist, the author of one of the synoptic gospels. St. Matthew was a Publican. In fact, the selection of St. Matthew as an Apostle infuriated the Pharisees. When Matthew threw a Feast for Jesus after he was called to be an Apostle, Jesus attending that Feast was one of the most damning and condescending attacks that the Pharisees used to justify their anger at Jesus and rationalize their disobedience. Jesus consorted with sinners and PUBLICANS. How dare someone like that presume to lecture us.

To help us appreciate the stigma of being with Publicans, we have to understand what a Publican is. When the Romans enslaved a territory by conquest, they extracted taxes as a penalty against that territory. The taxes were not just “payment for services,” they were punitive. The Tax sent the message that we enrich ourselves at your expense. They also were a constant reminder that Israel was subjugated to Rome by threat of fear of violence.

Rome could impose her will in any way and any time she wanted.

The Romans did not collect the tax themselves. Instead, they put the job of collecting taxes out for bid to a local group (like outsourcing jobs today). The group that won the bid could use any means of collection they wanted, legal or illegal, peaceful or violent, and they could fatten the tax to pay themselves out of the overage to any extent they wanted as long as the Romans got their cut. Typically, the publicans were Jews who got rich collecting taxes by threats and extortions from their own people while supporting the hated invaders that dominated their own people. In modern terms, it's like prisoners of war that brutalize their fellow prisoners to gain favor from their captives. Publicans were lower than mere sinners. They were despised as profiteers making their money from the misery of their brothers. They were traitors. The Bible doesn't tell us St. Matthew was a kind or benevolent publican, it just says he was a publican, and we might assume he was like the rest. Certainly the Pharisees saw him as a traitor and despised him, and despised Jesus for taking him in, making him a disciple, and sharing his ministry.

But Jesus elevates this publican above the Pharisees in His heart and at His banquet. He doesn't see a traitor in Matthew, He sees another sinner, one more doomed and damned soul in need of forgiveness, restoration, and love. He invites Him from the table of custom, the tax collectors seat, and invites him to join this roving band of religious fanatics that dare to challenge the elite of the Jewish spiritual society. When Matthew accepts that invitation, he is not only placed at the table ahead of the Pharisees, he is promised that, with the other Apostles, he will in fact, he will be seated on a throne in heaven to judge the house of Israel. He gets this honor not for who He was or what He did, but because of who Jesus was, and because when Jesus called him to a new life, to a new spirituality, to a new vocation, Matthew left behind his riches of earth in favor of a life of sacrifice and preaching, and finally, even martyrdom, for the riches to come in heaven.

So, how do we apply these lessons to our own lives. Quite simply, we have to learn that those things in which we take pride, in which we glory, are not as important to our sanctification as the ways in which we serve God and the people He puts in our lives. We are given talents, and we shouldn't play humble and deny our gifts. What we should do is to be thankful of those gifts and thoughtful about how our talents are intended to serve

the people in our lives. The blessings and talents that we have in this world, the lives we lead are not a separate six days from the day we worship. To think we get six days to God's one is clearly prideful. This day of worship is the day we pray for grace and understanding about how our gifts are to be applied in God's service the rest of the week. This day we are reminded that our glory comes not from the people who admire us, but how we remember the people who need us. This is the day we are spiritually nourished and strengthened so that we have the energy and perseverance to do the work we are appointed to do, to glorifying God by sacrificing for each other.

In today's Gospel, Jesus challenges the Pharisees to look into their hearts and make sure their actions toward their brothers and their dedication to God's will matches the spirituality they profess. He asks them to test themselves for hypocrisy and re-center their spirituality, putting God first in their hearts, their neighbors second, and themselves last.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is asking us to do the same. Our sacraments and liturgy reinforce the lesson. In the Prayer of Humble Access, that we do not presume to come to this table in our righteousness, but in the mercy of Jesus, and then a few minutes later, we confess that we are not worthy that Jesus should come under our roofs. When we discover that humility, when we mean these words we profess, it pleases the Lord. As unworthy as we are, we are loved, and as we come to the heavenly banquet, he will take us by the hand, and tell us that though we came to the lowest seat at the table in humility for our shortcomings, yet for the sake of His love for us, and in blessing for our humility, He will raise us up to life, raise us up to a place of honor at the heavenly table, raise us up to be with Him in heaven. That is His promise, and it is our purpose in Creation, and our vocation. Let's close this time of reflection with the same prayer St Paul prayed for us and for our vocation in today's epistle.

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech that ye Walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called With all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, Forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to keep The unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" Eph 4:1-3

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.