



# ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday October 25, 2015 – Trinity XXI

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

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

“The nobleman saith unto him, Sir, come down ere my child die. Jesus saith unto him, Go thy way; thy son liveth. And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way. And as he was now going down, his servants met him, and told him, saying, Thy son liveth. Then inquired he of them the hour when he began to amend. And they said unto him, Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him. So the father knew that it was at the same hour, in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth: and himself believed, and his whole house.”

A simple encounter and a miraculous cure. This familiar gospel reading should be both comfortable and comforting. But it isn't so comfortable, and what comfort there is has an edge. There are several similar encounters between Jesus and a desperate parent. In each encounter, there is a test before the miracle is granted. The woman whose daughter was possessed is turned away as an unfit dog and begs Jesus that even the dogs should get the crumbs that fall from the children's table before her daughter is healed. Another nobleman whose daughter is dying is tested by the arrival of servants that inform him the daughter has died, and Jesus tells the nobleman he has to believe despite the news, if he wants his daughter to be restored. Another father, whose son is possessed, is told by Jesus that boy can be delivered if the father believes and the father cries out, “I believe, help thou my unbelief”.

That statement reflects the state of this father's faith, and it reflects the state of the faith that we practice as well. This man in today's gospel is told he won't have signs and miracles to aid his faith. In response, he begs Jesus, “Sir, come down ere my child die.” Jesus doesn't go with him, he tests his faith and sends him on the way after he proclaims he does believe. And yet, it is only when the child has been healed and the nobleman can assuredly connect the time to his encounter with Jesus, that he admits the second time, that he believes.

I don't think that we can imagine anything more terrifying than the illness of our children, our loved ones, our families. We would like to believe that Jesus would rush to our aid unbidden, healing before we could even ask, but these accounts are uniform. Jesus waits to be asked, then teaches and tests, before He gives the compassionate healing these desperate parents seek. So we have to ask, why doesn't Jesus

just heal on whim? Why are we forced to ask? Why are we tested by these terrible situations in the first place?

The beginning of our understanding has to be that Jesus did not allow these children to be sickened for the sake of an object lesson to their parents or to us. In fact, that these children are in the families at all is the gift that God intends for us. As God gave Eve to Adam so that Adam could learn to love her as means to understanding God's love for him, so these families, and all families, are gifts of beloved ones, so that we can learn how God loves us in the way we love and our loved by them. Not only are they gifts in this time, where our love is broken and weak, and compromised by selfishness and pride, but God gives us our beloved so that they will be with us when we finally can live in His love, which is both perfect and eternal. We should start every day with thanksgiving that God so loves us that He gives His beloved Son to die so that we can live forever with the loved ones He has given us.

But that is not the story of these parents, is it. When they come to Jesus, it is in desperation, as a last resort. Their self reliance has failed. They could not insulate the child from harm, no doctor could be purchased that could deliver the child from evil, no wealth or privilege or authority could answer the challenge of the beloved child's distress, and so at the end, when everything else they could have done of themselves has failed, they finally turn to Jesus and beg with humility that God would have pity on their beloved for the sake of their love.

The reason Jesus makes them ask and tests them is because He is insuring the request finally comes from humility rather than pride. We can imagine that if he jumped to our own aid, we might think Jesus was responding to our position, our authority, or perhaps we had manipulated Him to do our will. Jesus will have none of that. The miracle is His gift bestowed upon His children by the grace of God alone. These parents are not allowed the dangerous luxury of believing pridefully that the credit for the miracle can come from them.

Which raises the question, why is it important that our pride is stripped from us as a condition of begging the grace of God? The answer of course, goes to the Beginning, to the purpose for which we were created and the source of our Fall from grace.

We were created by God for only two reasons; to be loved by God and to return that Love. He did not make us to suffer and die. There is neither in the Garden. To allow us to return His Love, God does two incredible things. First, He gives us free will, because Love that is coerced is not love. Only love freely given can be godly. The second incredible

gift is that He knows that we, as creatures, will never be able to understand the nature of our Creator. To help us to know His Love, Adam is given a life mate, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. They even, together, have only one name, so that they, through the love of each other, can learn how the love of God can be in us and how our lives can be in Him.

When the Devil tempted us, his appeal was to pride. Why should we be satisfied to be the obedient creature whose life was in the love of God when instead we could be like God, we could be the source of our own energy and life and authority. Of course, when we make ourselves like God, we cease to be the vessel of His love, and instead we choose to be our own source of life and love. Because we are not God, because we were made in time, our life and love is finite, and we cannot sustain ourselves in our lives, so we can't keep the people we love alive either. Because detached from God, our love is broken, and weak, and prone to selfishness, the gifts of love we give each other are also broken and weak and selfish.

Picture a rose picked from its bush. It has some life in it. It's beauty persists a while. The bees might even find enough pollen to touch another flower, but the rose, though reflecting the source of its life and beauty, has no ability to be its own life, and so it is alive only to die. Or picture a water hose. As long as it is connected to the spigot, it is filled with water and can deliver water in an endless supply. But when the spigot is off, the hose has only the water left in it from the last time it was connected. It's stream will weaken, and sputter and eventually the hose will be nothing but an empty shell.

The promise of the devil that we can be like God is an empty promise. The premise that we can sustain ourselves is the source of pride, and pride is dying and death. That pride, that determination to be like God, to depend on ourselves is not just the sin of Adam and Eve, it is the sin we all share.

But, we have a loving God. Even we are disobedient and prideful and ungrateful, He loves us. He does not want anything bad for us, even those terrible things we choose for ourselves in our pride, like living a life that ends in illness and death. Because He loves us, God takes the terrible consequences of the choices we make, and turns them into blessings. He makes the path we choose to wander away from Him to end back with Him.

When the devil tempted Adam and Eve, he said to them, "If you eat of the fruit of the tree, you will not surely die." In some texts, that surely die is translated die, die. Because he loves us, God turns the lie of the devil into hope. If we will abandon our sinful pride, and re-connect to the source of life, which is God's love, we may not surely die. By

giving His only Son to die for us, God changes the very nature of death from withering lonely emptiness and separation, to very door through which we can be reunited in endless life and endless love.

When Adam and Eve are sent from the Garden, it is the act of an angry God. Remember when, after we pulled some childish stunt, we were sent to our room, or grounded from enjoying our friends. Our parents weren't gleefully taking vengeance of us for being stupid. They kept us from the life of family and friends for a little while so that we would come to the wisdom that it was worth being obedient, making better choices, than it was to be alone. This world we live in is our time out.

In essence, God takes that detached rose and puts it in a vase. He fills the vase with water, with His love, and with the people whom He gives us to love, and He gives us the chance to experience both the sad withering end of our own prideful choice, or to be reconnected for eternity to His life and love in obedience and humility, to follow the Cross and go through the door of death to eternal life. He gives us time to learn from our prideful sin and to abandon it in favor of humble obedience.

Our loving God still turns the lie of Satan into blessing, even in our lives. When the ones we love are sick, when we finally exhaust our self reliance and realize we can be with them only by the grace of God, we are turned toward Salvation.

We are never more loving, more Christ like, than we minister to the sickness in the ones we love. That is where we learn unconditional love, that is when we humbly sacrifice ourselves and our time and our privileges. That is when we learn to cherish every minute, every second, to be about sharing our love instead of simply wasting time. Yjat is when we are grateful to share precious time. That is where we learn the fear of surely dying, of being forever separated, and it is when we choose to live in a way that will let us follow the ones we love to eternal life rather than withering endless loneliness.

If we will believe, we can follow Jesus into everlasting life. Those that leave before us, whom we mourn and miss, remind us that we must strive to follow where they have gone. We are not separated from the forever, they have only gone ahead to pray and pull us through to the place where they will be with us forever in the love of life of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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