



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday, February 12th 2017 – Septuagesima

“And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.”

**✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost ✠**

I believe it's a matter of general knowledge in this parish that Fr. Novicki and I were ordained to the diaconate together, and to the priesthood together the following year. And nobody could have been happier than he or I about it, except maybe our families. You see, it took us what seemed like an eternity from the day we became postulants to the day of our ordination. Many men do it in four years, some in two. In the time it took Fr. Novicki and myself however, he turned a little gray, I turned a lot gray, he became a gentleman farmer in another state, I wound up with an entire family, Pluto was declared no longer a planet, and we went from a world where the iPhone didn't exist, to a world where arguably everybody owned one, or something like it.

Mark you, the problem wasn't that John and I weren't up to the task; the problem was a lack of good Anglican seminaries coupled with the fact that there were fewer every day. I used to joke that he and I signing up for courses had become a bit of a bad omen for the seminary or school in question, given the number of times he and I would complete a course of study, only to learn that that was to be the final course the school was offering, due to bankruptcy or some other educational or ecclesiastical malady.

We soldiered on though, and we passed our canonical exams, and a date was set for our ordination. We were both obviously thrilled, and our families rejoiced. Believe it or not, I say this not to draw a parallel between he and I and the labors in the field in terms of the amount of *time* any of them spent. You see, when Fr. Novicki and I were ordained, I remember talking to one family member who is more or less unchurched, and he said “well you **DESERVE** it!” I said “no, nobody *deserves* to be a deacon or a priest, that's not how that works.” And he insisted “but you worked so hard, you *deserve* this!” Again, I said “well, you can say that I've been found fit by the examining chaplains and the bishop to answer the call, but it's not about ‘deserving’ anything.” In the end, I couldn't convince him that this idea of deserving a collar was theologically indefensible, so I merely thanked him for the vote of confidence and grabbed a glass of wine at the reception.

But it's very easy for us to get wrapped up in what we think we deserve, isn't it? It's easy, when things aren't going our way at work or at home, or when we don't feel like we're appreciated enough by the people that surround us, to simply mutter “I deserve better than

this.” Or if we’re keeping company with Saint John of the Cross and his Dark Night Of The Soul, to have the temerity to look heavenward and mutter the same to God. And this is in spite of the fact that unless our Bibles are collecting dust at home, we know that the only thing we really *deserve* is eternal separation from God; we know that our sin is too great and our justification too little to ever even consider approaching the throne of the Most Holy.

It doesn’t matter what your merits are, regardless of your station in life, class, race, or office or Order in the church. For my salvation, it doesn’t matter how many times I say Mass, or preach for better or for worse, how many sick parishioners I visit, what kind of missions work or pastoral care I do, or what kind of husband or father I am - my merits are, when compared to a perfect and righteous God, are less than a drop of water in the ocean. I’m not saying these things are worthless - God forbid I argue with St. James when he says that faith without works is dead. What we do is an outward sign of what we believe, and in that way, are not unlike the Sacraments we hold so dear. We need only look to the “corporal works of mercy” that the Roman, Anglican, and Methodist churches have always held to, to see that Jesus sees the value in works. He tells us to feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned, and to bury the dead.

But none of these things, even if we do them each a thousand times, accords us sufficient merit to save our souls, much less to demand an accounting from God regarding who He rewarded, or how He rewarded them.

The good news, of course, is that we don’t have to worry about this. It’s good news for me, at least - I struggle to balance a checkbook to the nearest dollar, I can’t imagine having to keep a running tally of my merits and my sins accurate enough that I’d feel comfortable presenting it to Almighty God as my only reason to be in His presence when I shuffle off this mortal coil.

That is why this parable is so terribly important not only to us, but to those with whom we share our faith, those to whom we evangelize; Jesus

wants us to understand that when our faith is placed in Him, we’re His - period. There is nothing we can add or take away from His grace or His righteousness that will affect our salvation. Certainly, our denial of Him creates a gap that cannot otherwise be bridged, but to believe that we have earned some sort of special recompense for simply following Him as He calls, is to misunderstand the nature of His invitation.

Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow Him, to forsake our lives for the Gospel, and to do the most shocking thing any religious leader or prophet has ever called their followers to do - to love others as we love ourselves. And it’s easy to see how hard it is for us to love ourselves when we see other people being given the same rewards as we are given, even if they didn’t earn them by our estimation. Just as the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son invested more energy in complaining that his father had never given him a fatted calf for partying than he did in thanksgiving for his brother still being alive, the laborers who spent the entire day in the field were too busy being jealous of their neighbors to share in their joy that they could at least feed their families that day.

Remember, if the goodman of the house had paid those final laborers only for the single hour they worked, it wouldn’t have been sufficient money to cover their needs; likewise, if God rewards us only for our cumulative merit, it would not be sufficient for our sanctification or justification. When we follow Christ, it doesn’t matter if we followed Him fastidiously since early childhood, or devoted ourselves in the second half or even final year of our lives - what matters is that when we do it, we really do it, just as the laborers obviously really labored.

The pay the laborers received may not seem like much to us in 21st century America, but a penny a day was seen as a reasonable amount of pay, arguably even a bit liberal. Our final salvation is of the same nature - it’s the thing promised to us by Jesus Himself, and it’s more than we really deserve. Thank God we didn’t have to earn it.

Amen