



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, September 1, 2019
The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at time*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Luke 14:1, 7-14
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A Strange Ladder

“Religion is the opiate of the masses,” Karl Marx famously wrote. Marx posited that when we human beings look out at the harshness of the world and the difficulties of our lives, when we contemplate the reality of our mortality, we find we can’t bear it and so we retreat into faith. Through faith in a loving God, in an afterlife, the argument goes, we are able to insulate ourselves, to numb ourselves against the injustices of the world and the pain of living. Religion is blessed escapism. Religion is a crutch.

Now, I disagree. In my experience, faith, if practiced consciously, is anything but a simple comfort. It asks of me all sorts of things I’d rather not do. It asks me to choose the hard road of loving my enemies, of forgiving those who’ve hurt me, of giving of myself to those in need, of looking inward and trying to be a better version of myself, of trusting God and praying even when God seems utterly absent.

Certainly, we can numb ourselves with religion, with faith. We can construct for ourselves an airtight religious ideology or worldview. We can insulate our hearts with self-soothing piety and build up walls of self-righteousness. We can treat religion as an aesthetic or moral balm and salve for the self alone.

It is an approach to religion that refuses to be troubled by the state of things out there (in the world). Or in here (in our hearts).

But religion is more than comfort. It has to be.

Now that’s not to say that religion doesn’t have a comforting role. When I visit people in the hospital, when I counsel the dying or the struggling, I am continuing the comforting work of Jesus. When you feed the hungry or hold in your arms a grieving friend, you are continuing the comforting work of Jesus. Pope Francis has called the church “a field hospital for sinners.” But the goal of a field hospital isn’t for the injured to remain in that field hospital hooked up to a morphine drip

forever. It's to bind up wounds so you can get back in the fight. Or so you can go home. It's about building up strength again. It's about transformation.

I hate going to the gym. We had a gym membership in Chicago and the gym was located almost literally at the end of our street. The only way it would have been easier to go would have been if it was in our actual apartment building. But, man, did I ever try and weasel out of going. "It's snowing," I'd say. Which is so obviously an excuse in the winter in Chicago. It's ALWAYS snowing. But if I wanted to get in shape, excuses wouldn't help me. I had to go and I had to suffer and struggle and run when my lungs burned and lift weights that weighed a lot less than I wanted them to until I built up endurance and strength to lift the heavier ones. But you have to be bad at something for a while, maybe even a long while, before you get good at it. The spiritual life is no different. To ascend towards God and towards holiness, you climb one rung at a time.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke shows us Jesus at a dinner party at the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. Jesus observes carefully, he watches the behavior of the guests. How they interact, how they choose the places of honor at the table. You can imagine these folks moving through the pre-dinner crowd, talking to the most prestigious guests. Networking. Hob-nobbing. Rubbing elbows. I've been at these parties. I'm sure some of you have as well. Socializing to build one's self up, making connections to advance one's own agenda. Climbing the social ladder. And Jesus calls them on it.

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor...But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.'"

And then Jesus says to his host,

"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

My Way, Jesus says, is not your way. My esteem is not your esteem. My kingdom doesn't work like yours.

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Humility can get a bad rap. It isn't about passivity or about self-hatred. It's about truth. It's about seeing ourselves truly. About doing the difficult work of introspection, of looking inward and knowing ourselves as we really are - the good and the bad bits alike. And then it's about putting that accurate picture of ourselves in a wider context. Seeing ourselves as contingent beings - reliant on God, our Creator. And coming to see that we are bound by God to others, as well, in a web of mutuality and interconnection, and that we - flawed, sinful humans, created by and accountable to God, intimately tied to others - are therefore to trust in God and to treat others with love and dignity and justice. Not to strive simply for self-interest and self-preservation. But to locate and ground our identity in God, our purpose in the Gospel, our relationships in love.

This is why religion isn't a crutch. Why it's more like going to the gym than going on vacation.

All of our human inclinations, our mammalian pleasures, are upward oriented. Up and away from pain and struggle, away from poverty and messiness, away from danger and vulnerability and towards comfort, control, ease, privileges and honors.

Jesus calls us downward as he ventured downward, into our world and into our hearts and into the depths of our souls, out onto the narrow way of humility and self-giving love that he himself embodied.

Saint Paul, in his letter to the Church at Philippi, wrote:

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name...”

God doesn't want us to be merely comfortable or successful or well-connected. God wants us to be glorious. God wants us to be holy. And that's hard and daily work.

If our faith is only a comfort, only a crutch, then the criticism of Marx and of others is right on the money. And that criticism is richly deserved. But if we embrace the way of the Cross, the way of humility and vulnerable love of God and neighbor, then our faith is not merely a drug, not merely a crutch to prop up our egos. It is a ladder.

But not a ladder like the corporate ladder, or the social ladder, a ladder of self-serving ambition and advancement. No, it's the ladder of the incarnation, of the cross, of humility, of love. And of true exaltation.

A strange sort of ladder indeed: that we climb down in order to rise.