

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, July 24, 2022

The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*

on

Genesis 18:20-32; Luke 11:1-13

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The Oldest Trick in the Book

When I was in elementary school, I was on a playdate with one of my friends, at his house after school. And as I dropped my backpack down inside his front door, he held out, hospitably, a green pack of Wrigley's Doublemint gum and asked if I wanted a piece. I said, "Sure, thanks." I took a single piece that he had helpfully stuck out of the pack. And then, Snap! Ow! The thing bit me! I threw it on the floor. My friend burst into laughter. And I just couldn't understand what was going on until I looked closely and saw that the pack of gum was actually a kind of mousetrap like device, with this spring-loaded metal trap hidden on the underside of the stick of gum. I had fallen for my friend's trick. And after my friend stopped laughing, I looked at my friend who took advantage of my trust, and laughed in delight at my pain, I looked at him with resolve and I said: "Oh my goodness, where can I get one of those!" We spent much of our playdate planning who would be the next mark.

Listening to our gospel reading today, we can tell that Jesus must have been familiar with this sort of thing. Well, not the gum trick. That was way ahead of his time. But I bet he could have taught me a few of the classics. You can find them in our reading for today. First there's the old, "hand a guy a snake, when he thinks you're handing him a fish" trick. It works well because there's scales on both. It could have been a prank that fishermen children played on one another. Also, Jesus refers to a trick where someone asks for a loaf of bread, and instead they get a bread sized stone. Not as alarming, but good for a chuckle. And then there's the old, "when your buddy asks for an egg, hand him a scorpion" trick. Ooh. That's some trick, Jesus. You see, because they'd think, at least for a moment, that the hard shell of the curled up scorpion was the hard shell of the egg. Instead of getting snapped like I did, they would get stung. Pretty devious.

But why is Jesus going on about some of the oldest tricks in the Book, especially after teaching his disciples how to pray? Because this is what he is doing. For the first time, he teaches his friends the Lord's Prayer, or "the Our Father," the prayer that begins with him addressing God as his Father, or has his Abba, in Aramaic, one of the few Aramaic words that remain in the Gospels, so we know its important, this term of endearment for a father, striking in its informality and intimacy. 'Abba' back then is not that far from 'Poppa' for us.

He teaches his disciples the "Our Pappa who art in heaven," he gives them an example of a prayer that you would say to our Pappa: among other things, that you would want to follow in his footsteps, that you would want his forgiveness, and you would want to follow in that loving stance toward for others. You ask that your Poppa might deliver you from the evil ambitions that stalk this world with impunity. It's a good prayer. One that we have enshrined at the center of our common life for thousands of years past, and thousands to come, I expect.

But what we can miss is what Jesus emphasized after he taught the prayer. He wanted to hit home the character of the one to whom they were praying. Because so much of what we say is affected by the character of who we think is listening. Like when I pet a cat that tends to scratch and bite every now and then, versus petting a cat that hasn't scratched a post. The kind of cat I'm petting changes the petting experience, although it is the same motions. One is tense and suspense, the other is calm and balm.

It's the same way with people, I'll accept a piece of gum from everyone here in the room, but I'll think twice when I accept a piece of gum from that childhood friend of mine. And it is the same way with God. My prayers will be quite different to a God who I think is violent and arbitrary and concerned about discipline and power, as opposed to a God who is generous and merciful and nurturing like a momma or a poppa. And so Jesus tries to hit home that God is like a loving parent to us by ruling out the thought that God is an arbitrary prankster. "Which abba among you," he says, "Would give their child a snake instead of a fish?" Like in his parable of God as a "Good Shepherd" caring for the sheep, especially the lost one. Jesus is trying to open our spiritual imagination to see God as a merciful and nurturing figure, much like a loving parent. "Which Abba," he means, "would treat their child so cruelly with such pranks? No one? Well, then, how much more so would your heavenly Abba give good gifts to children who ask!" You know what a good parent is like, and God, the parent of all, is indeed the truly, complete loving parent of all.

There is plenty of biblical precedent for the principle of a kind of divine parental punishment. Look at what God is said to have done to the twin cities of Gomorrah and Sodom, raining down fire for their unfaithfulness. Abraham is even seen negotiating with God in our Genesis reading, trying to encourage him to be more merciful. If God is like that, then the thing for the people of God to do would be to rain fire down on their enemies, but Jesus doesn't see it that way, at all. Earlier in Luke's Gospel, the disciples, James and John, asked Jesus to allow them to command fire to come down from heaven to destroy a village of Samaritans, Samaritans that had kicked them out.

But Jesus doesn't see it that way. God does not will the fate of Gomorrah and Sodom for those who resist his friends. How does he put it? He turns and rebukes them and says "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy lives, but to save them." Despite what you may have been taught, God's intentions are good and creative, not twisted into vengeance and destruction.

The character of God is so important to clarify. People talk about God, but do they mean the same thing? What is God like? So much of the ministry of the prophets before Christ and the apostles and saints after Christ are set on demonstrating to us what God is really like, showing us in biography, in the flesh. And Christ's life is the epitome of showing what God is like, especially among people who think they have God all figured out, who think God is only out to support the good and holy and to punish and purify the wayward and the scoundrels. The Scriptures often bear witness to a God like this, or something like this. But this characterization doesn't end there, it changes, it grows, culminating in the character of Christ.

Over time, our collective spiritual imagination is taken out of a certain darkness. Our spiritual vision has its blinders removed. Jesus knew that this process was pivotal for our prayer. The quality of our prayers depend upon our moving away from the long-standing view of God as an Enforcer, as a tyrant to court or curry favor. Jesus wants us to pray knowing that God, the ground of all being, is not out to trick us with confusing or esoteric doctrines, to get us when we make mistakes (when so much of the world is), God is not out to declare us stained or ruined, exiled or executed. God is not out to strike us down when we step out of line, like some vengeful Zeus with a lightning bolt. God is like a nurturing parent, even for the ones that have never had a true parent, God is the true parent who desires, not punishment or pranks, but mercy and healing for all of the children in the house. May we ask for that same desire, that same Spirit to fill us and animate our lives. May we seek and find the place within where the spirit of Christ resides. May we knock on that door, in prayer, to find opened to us God's house of mercy, our true home.