

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, June 25, 2023

The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Jeremiah 20:7-13; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

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Redeemed from Fire by Fire

In a remarkable section of the abundantly remarkable *Four Quartets* of T.S. Eliot, there is this:

“The only hope, or else despair

Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-

To be redeemed from fire by fire.”

We don't have the choice not to burn with something.

Something will enflame us, motivate us, empower us, inspire us.

Consume us.

Sometimes, I think, we need a little reminding. That. What it means to be a Christian.

Is to burn with a particular fire.

And our Gospel this morning is one such needfully insistent reminder.

At this point in Matthew chapter 10, Jesus has called the disciples, empowered them for ministry

And explained to them that they will be persecuted:

That the world—understood as a pattern of human relationship characterized by the powers of

Violence, sin, and death, to which powers humanity had lain long in bondage—

The world will not take kindly to the disciples’ ministry and message,

Meaning, as they do, as the Gospel does, the world’s undoing.

And if you can believe it, this section of Matthew 10 that we heard this morning

Is Jesus’ attempt to comfort the disciples. To encourage them to stay the course,

To not be distracted nor discouraged by adverse circumstances, suffering, difficult times,

Nor to fall back into the familiar and comfortable bondage of the world’s sin-sick pattern,

Because compared to the hardships of walking the Way of Love, the Way of the Cross

The world’s way may seem like safety, reprieve, or peace.

But in fact it’s none of those things.

That’s one of the secrets that the disciples are called to boldly proclaim from the housetops:

This world doesn’t know peace at all.

Jesus says, then:

“Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul.”

People will think, Our Lord says, that by silencing you, they’ll have peace. They won’t.

So know this: whatever people may seek to do to you because you stand up for me, for love,

For what’s true, good, beautiful, it cannot rob you of who you are,

If who you are grounded, settled, rooted in me, says Jesus. And that rootedness is peace.

This is good news. And then you might think it goes a bit sideways,

Because you know what’s coming.

“Rather,” says Jesus, “fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”
But that’s not God he’s talking about.
The word for hell here is Gehenna, a reference to the valley
In which, according to Scripture,
Children were euphemistically made to “pass through the fire,”
Sacrificed to propitiate or petition the blood-thirsty god Moloch.
Gehenna represents a particularly horrific human possibility:
That in order to seek blessing, prosperity, goodness
We would be willing to burn each other alive and call it holy.
Don’t be afraid, says Jesus, of someone who can destroy your body
Be afraid of what will become of your body and soul, should you yourselves become destroyers.
So have no part of that.
He goes on to say,
You can manage to acknowledge the price of a sparrow when you buy and sell it
But do you know how much it means, is valued, by God?
So imagine how valuable you are, your neighbor is, to God
And have a care for that value.
Indeed, the story of Jesus’ life will show that there is nothing he values more,
Not heaven, not his own glory, power, strength, not even his life
Nothing that he would not give up to be in relationship with us.

Gehenna, then, is the perditionous condition of habitually undervaluing
The preciousness of another human life,
And the willingness to maim, marginalize, or destroy that life
for the sake of some misconstrued or misapprehended good.
And in case we need reminders that the flames of Gehenna burn bright even today:
Open a newspaper, check your newsfeed: War is Gehenna
Racism is Gehenna
Homophobia is Gehenna, Transphobia is Gehenna
Misogyny is Gehenna
Agism, ablism, and every way by which we’re willing to use each other or sacrifice each other
For the sake of some diabolical utopia, power, privilege or self
But never willing to lay down our own lives for each other: *that* is Gehenna.

And in case you’re thinking to yourself:
Oh well great! I don’t do any of that stuff, I’m set, thank you, Jesus!
There’s more.
Jesus tells us that, because he takes up the cross,
We’re called to do likewise.
Because Jesus stands up to the powers of Gehenna,
We’re called to do likewise.
Because Jesus takes his stand with the outcast, with the scapegoat, the oppressed, the poor
We’re called to do likewise.
Because Jesus opened his arms to all the violence, terror, and death we could muster against him,
We’re called to do likewise,
Not because we thereby save our own or anyone else’s souls
We don’t—Jesus does that in his one full perfect and sufficient sacrifice,
Exhausting the finite powers of Gehenna in the fullness of his infinite life
And rising again to bring new life to us, not because we earned it, but because he loves us—
We’re called to do likewise, because if Jesus is the Author and Perfector of our faith
His life must live, by grace, in us.
His way must be our way.

The fire of love that animates his sacred must burn in us.
And we can only be heralds of death's undoing
If we ourselves risk being undone by love, for love, and in love.
Which means: there is no armchair Christianity.
We might succumb to a very popular notion of religion
That it's a private affair meant for personal betterment or self-actualization
A way to help us engage, cope with, or accommodate ourselves to
Living in a world that is quite literally on fire.
But that is not Christianity: that is nonsense.
And Jesus tells us as much today:
"I came not to send peace, but a sword."
I didn't come to make you feel comfortable with what's destroying you,
I didn't come to make you feel cozy
I didn't come to empower you to make peace with oppression, says Jesus.
I came to love you out of the bonds of death that bind you,
To cut away from you the sin that plagues and devours you
And to give you, as your own, my divine life.
So if you prefer the coziness, the comfort, the death, the sin,
You can have it, but you will not have me.
You prefer your respectability to me? You can have it.
You prefer your family, friends, money, power, comfort, your good name, your sense of self?
You can have it.
But you won't have me.
Would you prefer, asks Jesus, not to stand up for the dignity of every human being
The dignity of the very Image of God,
For the sake of which I set aside my own glory to glorify you?
Would you prefer to risk nothing for the sake of love?
Would you prefer your own life to mine?
You can have it. And you won't be able to keep it.
But if you're prepared to lose it all for me, for love:
What truly good thing would not be yours if you share my life with me,
If you discover yourself held and loved in me?

Beloved, there's no way of getting around it:
There is no armchair Christianity that is not fundamentally pernicious
And that does not collude with Gehenna by refusing to be a counter-sign to it.
We're called to follow Jesus in the way of self-sacrificial love,
The way by which we lose all that we prefer
For the sake of the fullness of grace and glory that God has desired for us
From before the foundations of the world.
If we follow Jesus in the way, we might indeed become fools in the eyes of the world.
But what of it? Christ has overcome the world.
We might suffer, pain or loss or both.
True
But we cannot be like Christ in his glory if we refuse to compassionate him
If we refuse to be like him
In his humiliation, in his passion, in his death.
We cannot be where the Master is or become who the Master is,
If we do not go the way the Master goes.

The way of the cross is rough, and we will stumble
But we will not walk it alone, indeed, we cannot.

There is One who Walks with us, who has pioneered this way and knows it,
Who picks us up when we fall, who inspires and encourages, who loves us.
And there are others on the way who support each other,
Who help the weary, who ease the way, who follow the example of their Lord.
It's to this way of rough glory that God in God's mercy has called us.
God has enticed us, and we have been enticed.
We cannot walk the way by standing on the sidelines,
Risking nothing, playing it safe, lurking in the shadows.
The rough road love blazed and illumined by its majestic fire may not feel always feel pleasant, But it is real
and it is good.
And whom God calls he will also empower, and those he empowers, he will also sustain.
So don't be afraid. Even the though the stakes are high.

“The only hope, or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre- / To be redeemed from fire by fire.”

Gehenna or love. With what will you burn?

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