

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Thursday, October 12, 2023

Bicentennial of the Founding of Saint Thomas Church

Procession and Solemn Eucharist

5:30 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rt. Rev. Mary Glasspool, Assistant Bishop of New York

on

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; 1 John 4:7-19; Matthew 13:44-52

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What is new and what is old

In preparation for this glorious event, I read the entire tome titled *Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue* by the late, great J. Robert Wright, published in 2001 [New York: Saint Thomas Church and Grand Rapids, Michigan: William E. Eerdmans Publishing Co.]. In that book, Dr. Wright quotes a pamphlet published in 1824, reprinted in your bulletin on page 2, which reads:

On Sunday evening, 12 October, 1823 (notice thereof having been previously given in some of the public papers) divine service, according to the rites of the Protestant Episcopal Church, was celebrated, for the first time, in the large room, No.440 Broome street, corner of Broadway, by the Rev. Dr. Wainwright, Rector of Grace Church; nearly all of the Episcopal clergy of the city being present: after which a discourse was delivered by the Rev. Cornelius R. Duffie, from Psalm lxxxvii, 2. (p. 8)

For those of us who have not yet memorized the entire Book of Psalms, Psalm 87 Verse 2 reads: *the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob*. And I wonder whether the Rev. Mr. Duffie would have referenced Verses 1 and 3 as well, giving Verse 2 its context. The whole reads: *On the holy mount stands the city he founded; the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God*. [NRSV] The Rev. Mr. Duffie was officially named the first Rector of St. Thomas Church in 1824, but his time in that position was relatively brief. Tragically, Mr. Duffie contracted typhoid fever and died on August 20, 1827. Yet even though his rectorship was short, in everything I have read, Duffie is remembered as a *beloved* figure – a leader: inspirational, humble, and faithful to Almighty God and the fledgling congregation of St. Thomas.

Your current Rector: the Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, his spouse: Mother Alison Turner, and the incredible leadership team currently serving this exquisite parish, has continued the tradition of bringing out of our treasure *things new and old*. Joined by a great cloud of witnesses, we now arrive at a very particular moment in time when we come together to celebrate a 200-year narrative that has incorporated many transformations along the way, including two devastating fires and relocation from downtown to midtown. Given the rich tapestry of history and events that comprises St. Thomas Church at 200, what pieces of treasure can we reflect on this evening that will provide some small sustenance as we celebrate coming this far, and take some nourishment for the days ahead? I suggest we reflect on three words which characterize the story of St. Thomas Church: **balance, beauty, and beloved**. These three words do not even come close to describing the entire life of this parish. Yet the words name aspects or dynamics of its life that are central – *core values* if you will – which infuse the life of St. Thomas with the bold power of God's Holy Spirit.

When we talk about *balance* a host of associations occur. My dictionary offers 25 definitions and then further names such specifics as *balance of power*, *balance of trade*, and *balance sheet* – treasurers take note! The essence of

the concept is that somehow there is *equal distribution* of power, or weight, or wealth. *Balance* names a *static* situation, but *seeking* balance can indicate a constantly moving back and forth that can be as small as two children on a seesaw, and as large as the swing of a giant pendulum. In fact, if we think of a pendulum in a mechanical clock, we see that the pendulum must be moving back and forth if the clock is to tell time and the passage of time. And yet the pendulum responds to both gravity and inertia and so, in a mechanical clock at least, keeps swinging.

The 200-year story of St. Thomas Church reveals an early testing ground for the 19th and 20th-century fight between “high” and “low” churchmanship in the Episcopal Church. St. Thomas’ history includes times of discernment of mission: *Are we to serve the rich, or the poor? The immediate surrounding area? Or move beyond, reaching out to the larger community? Does St. Thomas Church name the building? Or the people?* You will, of course, recognize that these are false choices based on dichotomies of our own making. But my own reading of the history of St. Thomas indicates that this part of the Body of Christ in the world has always sought the equilibrium of *balance* without abnegating its prayerfully discerned *identity*. And that dynamic of *seeking* balance is one of the life streams of this church. The lesson from Ecclesiastes speaks of many kinds of balance in life. And the Gospel is for and about the rich *and* the poor. We can have and offer the world a beautiful building *and* understand the *people* as the Body of Christ. We can serve the needs of the immediate neighborhood *and* reach out beyond our immediate life. **Balance.**

I worked hard on the *balance* part of this sermon. Speaking about **beauty** in relation to St. Thomas is practically effortless. From the ethereal music sung by the Saint Thomas Choir of Men and Boys with the Modus Operandi Orchestra, to the sight of the exquisite stained-glass windows and magnificent reredos, to the smell of sweet incense, to the taste of good food and drink, to the feel and sense of fellowship in liturgy and worship, Saint Thomas has long been characterized by *beauty*. Beauty surrounds us right here and right now. And the world is in such need of beauty. Sometimes we find ourselves needing to justify the expense of energy or money into supporting beauty. But the beauty of God’s world is not a luxury – it’s a necessity, especially in times of great ugliness and despair.

When I think about the need for beauty, I am reminded of the *Bread and Roses Strike* from January until March 14, 1912 in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Led mostly by women textile workers, the strike was remarkable for at least two things: It was peaceful and ended without injury, and it united dozens of immigrant communities under the leadership of the *Industrial Workers of the World*. James Oppenheim coined the slogan *bread and roses* in a poem first published in 1911 - and the slogan was picked up by the strikers in Lawrence in 1912. Oppenheim's poem was set to music in 1976 by Mimi Farina, and was made famous (as far as I'm concerned) by Judy Collins' recording of it. The music and the lyrics tell the story of the 1912 Strike and the ongoing struggle for human dignity and matters of the heart as well as adequate food, clothing and shelter, and humane working conditions. The song is a marching song, and one verse goes like this:

*As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days,
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses, bread and roses.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; bread and roses, bread and roses.*

[Bread and Roses lyrics copyright Reservoir Media Music]

We all need bread. And we all need roses too.

Balance. Beauty. Beloved. I’m tempted to go directly to the Epistle lesson and quote the writer of I John and leave it at that: *Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God.* But that would be too easy, and while the lesson assures us that God loved us first, and gave Jesus to

us to show us the way, I believe we really need to look at the Gospel lesson to learn something about *how* we build the Beloved Community – or the *kingdom of heaven*, as the Gospel Writer Matthew puts it. We can receive some guidance from Jesus Himself and the Gospel lesson.

Matthew's Jesus is teaching his disciples about the kingdom of heaven and what it's like. The kingdom of heaven which Jesus teaches about and the Beloved Community which we are trying to build, are similar in nature, if not the same. Jesus says (and forgive me here – I'm going to translate the King James Version into the New Revised Standard Version so that I can speak without spitting), "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field..." The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls..." "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea..." Going back a few verses in Matthew's Gospel, we can add Jesus saying "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." And "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

A colleague of mine recently noted that if there was only one way to God, Jesus would have told only one parable. But he doesn't. The kingdom of heaven is like this, or this, or this – in an attempt to be as exhaustive and reach as many people as possible. *You – there- the kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great price. That doesn't work for you? Okay, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field..... no? all right, the kingdom of heaven is like a net cast into the sea...*

Then we have to ask: Is the kingdom of heaven *really* like a mustard seed, like yeast, treasure, a pearl, a net? No, not exactly. The grammatical structure of the Greek indicates that a better translation of *all* of these little parables would be: "It is the case with the kingdom of heaven as with a mustard seed" or "as with a little yeast". Can you hear the difference? The emphasis in each parable is not meant to be placed on the object itself. The purpose of each parable is to compare the kingdom of heaven with *the final stage of the process there described*. So - the kingdom of heaven is not exactly like a mustard seed. What the kingdom of heaven is like is the *tree* that the seed eventually becomes. The kingdom of heaven is not exactly like yeast. What it's like is the risen dough when the yeast has permeated the whole thing. The kingdom of heaven is not like treasure hidden in a field. It is like the *response made to finding* treasure hidden in a field. Likewise, the kingdom of heaven is not *like* the pearl of great value. It's like the *response* of the merchant in search of fine pearls. And finally, the kingdom of heaven is not exactly like a *net* thrown into the sea - but the situation at the *coming* of the kingdom is compared to the sorting out of the fish caught in the net. Take note! We're getting some instructions on what it's like to build the Beloved Community!

With all of these parables, but perhaps particularly with the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great value, Jesus seems to be saying that God sometimes acts in hidden ways. Paradoxically, God sometimes *reveals* Godself through that which is *concealed*, but discoverable. Sometimes God acts in hidden ways.

Jesus, himself, is a living instance of this. The eyes of a civilization seeking for power, creativity, and change are all fixed on Rome. Yet it is away from that focus where God acts. Rome is not the divine center; it is Bethlehem. Jewish tradition looks to a Messiah who will come with power and charisma to conquer. But there comes a village carpenter. Instead of seeking his following in the center of power, at Jerusalem, he remains secluded in the hills of Galilee. Instead of outlining a political plan, he speaks of a kingdom concealed in the human heart and in the designs of God. When finally he submits to the terrible wheel of history which revolves to crush him, he lies sheltered in the tomb and then emerges as conqueror of death. God sometimes acts in hidden ways.

If indeed God works this way, then we are wise always to presume the possibility of God's activity in places that are hidden. If we regard an area of life as ordinary and everyday and pedestrian - then let us beware! Mustard seeds lie in dirt, waiting for the sun and a little water to free them to grow! If we come to take relationships for granted, then let us be careful! Under ordinary fields there may be treasure. If colleagues at

work, or the place itself, or its tasks, have begun to feel soul-destroying; it is just possible that somewhere hidden in that situation is an element which can become an entry point into new possibilities, and a door into the beloved kingdom.

As St. Thomas Church continues seeking ways to build the Beloved Community, know that in addition to the treasures that appear obvious, there are some hidden treasures that have yet to be revealed. They can pop up anytime, maybe even tonight! The treasure you've been seeking might be sitting right next to you! The pearl of great price might be the one you've been looking at for lo these many years, yet have not recognized its value. The net cast into the sea has drawn us all together this evening, but I sense that our purpose and call will move us beyond this celebration to cast that net again and again and again.

Balance. Beauty. Beloved. These are words that describe, at least in part, life at St. Thomas Church. They are words that can help guide us as we continue to seek the kingdom of heaven and build the Beloved Community. Recognizing that: the **balance**, **beauty**, and **beloved** nature already here, St. Thomas Church can do what it does best: bring out of that rich treasure what is new and what is old, to the honor and glory of God.

Amen.