

Sunday, July 14, 2024
The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar and Chief Operating Officer*

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Sermon for the Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Imagine, if you will, the way our lives might appear from God's perspective, like children building sandcastles on a vast beach. With our divinely-given pail and shovel, we create these castles with our hopes, routines, and loves. Each of us has our own unique architectural style, adorned with beautiful and delicate details. Over time, some of our castles merge into others, sharing a room or even an entire wing. Some castles we build with a partner, or family, or community, together. And, sadly, some are lost to the waves of time and tide.

But there's a deeper sorrow. Some castles don't fall to the waves. We have our pail and shovel, but we also have these feet. For various reasons, some of us feel compelled to preempt those waves and use our feet to kick the castles down before their time.

No matter the nature of the destruction, every shocking act forces us to confront a stark reality: this world that God has given us is one in which we each have the power to destroy each other. Our motives can be unclear, or they can be driven by intense emotion. Some castles fall prey to a destructive spirit that says, 'If I can't have you on my own terms, no one can,' or, 'If the world will not bend to my will, it will perish by my will.'

Despite all the security measures we establish, we cannot fully protect ourselves from individuals—whether they act on behalf of a nation, a party, or alone—who follow through with this destructive conviction.

Today's reading finds Jesus reeling from a tragedy—the murder of his older cousin, John the Baptizer. It was certainly political.

John had been arrested for his preaching criticizing Herod, the Tetrarch, or local governor of Galilee, and his choice of wife, formerly the wife of his half-brother. Herodias, holding a grudge, successfully outmaneuvered her husband at a feast to have John executed without a trial, but as a personal transaction. His body was desecrated with cruel humor during that banquet, displayed to Herod and all the leaders of Galilee with John's head on a platter, a crushingly public and undignified final chapter for a good man.

What must this have done to Jesus' spirit? Along with the deep grief that comes with any loss, the murder of John (the closest thing he had to a peer in ministry) underlined what the world can do, even the world of his own people. What would stop it from happening to him? Nothing really. His disciples then returned from their two-by-two traveling ministry. Some villages accepted them; some had cast

them out. They return frazzled around the time of John's funeral. And so, in the midst of their tired grief, Jesus says, "Come to a deserted place by yourselves and rest awhile." And they do. They all pile into a boat, take it into the middle of the Sea of Galilee, away from the crowds. They rally their spirits, drawing energy from God and from one another. After that rest, they are able to make their way forward again. They move on, to another shore, to more crowds, renewed to heal the sick, and feed the multitudes, and their path to Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets, that faithful path continues.

Is our world more fraught with peril than Jesus'? Maybe it is safer, as a whole, maybe it is more dangerous than ever, I can't tell. But what we are shown on our screens of this world of ours is anything but tranquil. Alongside the horrible desolation that nations can mete out, our individual powers, too, have escalated. We live in a world where you don't have to be a governor or king to have your spiritual sickness destroy lives on a mass scale. Now all of us can wield fathomless destruction in our hands. And some fall to the temptation to wield that destruction.

In our Baptisms, which we wouldn't be doing if it weren't for John, we give ourselves an indelible mark that proclaims that we have come to terms with a certain quality of this world that is quite brutal. We are baptized into Christ's death. We publicly proclaim that we are in a world that kills Christ, that kills the things and people of God.

But also in baptism, thank heaven, we share in Christ's resurrection. We proclaim that the things and people of God do not truly die. As God raised Christ, so will we be raised. While we reaffirm this truth with every baptism, there are especially trying times when we need each other for solace and renewal. It's in the times of darkness that Christ says to us, as he said to his disciples, "Come to a deserted place by yourselves and rest awhile."

But what can we do when we reel from the slings and arrows of this world? What is really to be done? I think the lynchpin of anything we would do is prayer. Some say prayer is worse than nothing, a distraction from true action, but, indeed, it is the ground of everything that really matters.

The greatest gift we can offer one another is our collective prayer—not merely kind wishes or good intentions, but profound prayer. This means holding others in the boundless love that flows within and among us, with grace and abundance. This has substance and carries weight. For it is the source of deep healing and enduring transformation. I urge you to make this your deliberate practice, and to invite others to join you in this sacred work, today and in the days to come.

When sand is heated enough, it becomes glass. Although our time on this earth may seem like a collection of sandcastles, there is something wonderful inside, hidden from view. When we love God and our neighbor, day by day, even in the face of the trials and tribulations of this world, the brittle sand of our lives is fired by the Spirit and becomes as glass. Glass that no wave can move, nor any foot kick down. One day, all the sand will pass away, revealing that our castles stand on a great rock crystal castle beneath the beach.

As Paul wrote, Christ is the cornerstone, the apostles and prophets are the foundations, and the saints are the pillars. As we live for God in this world, the substance of our lives will also be the bricks. We all can have a share in this great castle upon which wave and foot are thwarted, and we can each have our home there, too. As Paul wrote, "In Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God."

Today, as Christ did, we regularly gather, setting ourselves apart in a quiet place to rest awhile, reminding ourselves that there is an eternal castle that no wave can topple and no foot can kick down. We can help God to build it up. In it we can find our rest and renewal. And our true home.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.
