

Yr. A, Proper 4

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Preached by Furman Buchanan

St. Martins in the Fields

1911 words

Lessons:

Psalm 31:1-5, 19-24

Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28

Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-31

Matthew 7:21-29

A few weeks ago we listened to the Good News proclaimed by St. Peter to the crowds at the very first Pentecost. He was quoting the Word of the Lord, as spoken through the prophet Joel—and this is what he said: “...Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”¹ Well, today we have just heard the Word of the Lord, as spoken through Jesus—and this is what *he* said: “Not everyone who says to me “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven...”² Let’s face it—it is much easier for us to respond, “thanks be to God” to the Word of the Lord as spoken by Joel and Peter.

Jesus has a reputation for inclusiveness, so why would *he*—of all people—contradict the promise that Joel declared to the Jewish people and which Peter reiterated and expanded to include Jews *and* Gentiles!

We like to think of Jesus as receiving all who call upon him, reaching out to us, arms open wide, like the good shepherd, welcoming—even pursuing—all of the flock.

I am reminded of one of the prayers for mission in the Morning Prayer service: “Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace...”³ This hardly conjures the image of one who would reject those who would call out to him.

For three straight chapters in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has been speaking many hard words without interruption—no questions, no dialogue, not even any commentary by Matthew. Here are a few disconcerting examples:

- Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.⁴
- If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.⁵
- Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.⁶
- Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...You cannot serve God and wealth.⁷

If any of you still feel justified, you can probably leave now—before we get to the confession and absolution. For the rest of us who have more self awareness than that, we find ourselves casting about for how we might become justified in the light of such impossible demands.

Martin Luther came to see the function of the Law—and places where Jesus makes the Law even more demanding—as plain and simple. He saw the function of the Law as simply making us aware of our own

¹ Acts 2:21, citing Joel 2:32

² Matthew 7:21

³ Book of Common Prayer, p. 101.

⁴ Matthew 5:20

⁵ Matthew 5:29

⁶ Matthew 5:44-45a, 48

⁷ Matthew 6:19, 24b

inability to meet it, and therefore appreciate our deep, deep need for God's grace and mercy. Put more succinctly, Luther summarized his point this way: "We are *all* beggars at the foot of the cross."

If there is one thing that upwardly mobile people living in a prosperous and powerful country need to work on, it is to work on becoming and remaining aware of our utter dependence upon God.

In 1987 I was a college student, and I set out to travel around the world by myself over the course of about nine months. A few weeks into the trip I landed in Ghana, which is in West Africa.

The people of Ghana are among the most gentle and tender group of people I have ever met. Yet, there was one venue where civil order and gentleness tended to break down—the bus station in Accra. Transportation was so scarce that throngs of people lunged for the door of every empty bus that arrived in the hot, dusty terminal. After several unsuccessful attempts trying to elbow my way onto the buses bound for the city of Kumasi, a couple of guys took pity on the solitary white guy in the ocean of eager passengers, a teenager who was disheveled, clueless and obviously despairing about how to make it to a remote city before nightfall.

They offered to lift me up when the next bus came so I could climb through one of the little windows near the back of the bus. The next bus arrived and the three of us ran for it. I took off my back pack and they shoved me, head first, through the back window of what looked like a dilapidated school bus.

I sat in the back row and watched in disbelief as adults, children, the elderly, babies—and an occasional chicken—crammed onto the bus, sitting, standing, crouching and filling every conceivable space. It was hot, and we were all mashed and wedged together. It was as if we were one body!

The bus struggled to move with such a payload, but eventually got to the main highway and picked up speed. Incredibly, my exhaustion and the hum of the engine caused me to doze off lightly, sitting in the back row and propped up by the mass of people jammed around me.

And then I was suddenly shocked awake, startled by a violent, screaming noise which turned out to be the sound of an exploding and unraveling tire and the friction of a bare wheel screeching against gravel. Then more screaming inside the bus, "JESUS, JESUS, JESUS."

Like an angry bull, the bus lurched off the highway and raced down an embankment, "JESUS, JESUS" smashing through a concrete wall, "JESUS, JESUS, JESUS" and mowing its way through a grove of banana trees.

We finally came to a stop. The bus remained upright, and so there were only bruises and cuts and scrapes.

Where I grew up, shouting "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus" with a loud or anxious voice was as bad as saying a curse word. It was a swearing of the worst sort, literally taking the Lord's name in vain.

What I learned that day is that the people on that crowded bus were not swearing at all, they were calling out to someone they knew, someone they knew *well*, someone they trusted.

They were well acquainted with their utter dependence upon God. They were well acquainted with being beggars at the foot of the cross. They didn't make a *social* call on a distant person with a reputation for inclusiveness. They made a *desperate* call on someone as near as the person wedged up against them, a person with a reputation for compassion—i.e. (that is to say) suffering *with us* in our trials.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven. To some, Jesus says, I will declare that I never knew you.”⁸

So where do we find our hope?

We will not find our hope in the Law, no matter how well we follow the rules. We certainly will not find our hope in some display of the Ten Commandments in a government building—as if their purpose had anything remotely to do with the development of American Jurisprudence. It is a shame and a disgrace to both Jews and Christians for pandering politicians to pluck the Jewish emancipation proclamation from slavery completely out of its context. The Judeo-Christian hope is not in the Law. It is in a relationship with a living God who sets us free.

We will not find hope in our personal respectability, no matter how respectable we are. We certainly will not find our hope in some license plate that says, “I believe.” It is a shame and a disgrace to all faithful people for pandering politicians to contrive a government-manufactured badge of respectability for one group. Our hope is not in painted sheet metal. Our hope is in a relationship with a living God who meets us on the highway, like the Good Samaritan—the one who brings healing and hope for stranded beggars like us who recognize our utter dependence on God’s mercy.

We will not find hope in our money, no matter how wealthy we are. We certainly will not find our hope in tax breaks that reward a few giant tobacco corporations with the most lucrative profit potential of any state in all the 50 states. It is a shame and a disgrace to all South Carolinians, but especially to our children that we reject a tax on cigarettes that would undeniably reduce teen smoking and raise hundreds of millions of dollars—for healthcare for the poor, or perhaps to begin addressing the corridor of shame where we have acquiesced to the despicable standard of a “minimally adequate education.” Our hope is in a relationship with a living God who gave the most powerful speech ever heard about an entitlement program—called the Sermon on the Mount.

When Jesus predicts that some people will hear him say, “I never knew you” he is telling us that the Kingdom of heaven is about relationships. It’s about intimate, trusting, compassionate relationships.

Place yourself in Jesus’ shoes for a moment: You wouldn’t say to someone, “I don’t believe I ever knew you” because you are not *inclusive*, you would say it only if it was true.

Dear people of St. Martin’s, we find our hope through relationships—with God and one another.

You see, being in the Church is a lot like being on that crowded bus.

First of all, somebody helped you on the bus, and you should give thanks for that relationship and for their kindness in helping you climb aboard. Second, as crowded and uncomfortable as it can sometimes be, we should give thanks that we are shoved together like one body—because those relationships often help cushion the bumps and bruises that come our way.

And finally, when things are falling apart, we should give thanks that we can call on Jesus, who we are getting to know more intimately, whose name we are learning to trust more deeply, whose compassion we are growing to accept more recklessly.

⁸ Matthew 7:21, 23

It is about relationship. It is about getting to know the one we call, “Lord, Lord” so that he won’t have to say, “I never knew you.”

I want to close by finishing the prayer for mission that I began earlier:

“Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name.”⁹

It is a grace to bring the knowledge and love of God to people who have not found their way onto the bus, and help them climb aboard. It is a grace to reach forth our hands in love to Crayton Middle School, Harvest Hope, Haiti, the Corridor of Shame, Honduras, and all the other ways we reach out into the world.

It is a grace to give *and receive* the saving embrace of Jesus to one another, and be the Body of Christ in this place.

Most of all, it is a grace to call out to the One who knows us, and loves us, and wants nothing more (or less) than to be in a compassionate relationship with us and with the rest of his wrecked, broken-down creation so that we might be wonderfully restored and made new.

Amen.

⁹ Book of Common Prayer, p. 101.