

Trinity Episcopal Cathedral Sermon

Sunday, October 4, 2009 - The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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The bird of Paradise flies to Heaven on two wings. The first is self-effort, the second is grace. The bird of Paradise flies to Heaven on two wings: grace and self-effort. And part of our spiritual life is figuring out that balance, for us, as we navigate Life's challenges and opportunities. How much do we depend on our own self-effort, and how much do we count on God's grace. And how do those two come together for us?

Within the Lectionary Cycle--about the last 5 or 6 or 7 Lectionary Readings for Sundays, from last Sunday, back...have all been primarily focused on self-effort. We've had the Wisdom Literature, which is all about sort of picking yourself up from your bootstraps, figuring it out, and then building a life of prayer and discipleship around that, and moving forward. Sometimes as disciples, we see that self-effort side as the difficult side. But I want to flip it, because our lectionary today does that.

Our lectionary today, puts us right in the crosshairs of grace. Because, we need God's grace to understand the words of Jesus today, don't we? We need God's grace. If you really ponder a bit, it's probably grace that's the harder place, because our hearts don't really open to God's grace until we've tried our best. And then we get on that hard edge, and open. In living, mature, discipleship then, grace is not the "Hallmark" airbrushed, gentle life -- sort of the comforting wind of God's breath, -- but grace is that hard edge, that cracks us open, ...and pushes us. I think that's what's going on in the Gospel reading today. I think we have Jesus as the teacher, who is really pushing the disciples hard.

I have a friend who used to work with a teacher. His teacher's name was Swami Muktananda. This was in the seventies, when some of our folks would go to India and follow gurus. And so, my friend Rob went to India, with his wife, and followed Swami Muktananda. Rob was a sculptor--a really good sculptor. And so part of Rob's ministry there in the ashram, was to sculpt. And Swami Muktananda had Rob do a series of sculptures, that were sort of ancient paragons of faith. And so Rob's current sculpture, at that time, was Moses. The sculpture was set right at the gates of the entrance to the community. And Rob was very proud that he got to do this... And Rob--being Rob--he got sort of obsessive with it. And he started to inflate. And he got more and more self-important. And he started driving people crazy. He didn't know this, of course. And he thought he was The Special One to the guru. Until one day...another sculptor (at the prompting of Swami Muktananda) -- another sculptor walked up and smashed Rob's sculpture to smithereens -- right in front of Rob. That's the hard edge of the teacher. And Rob Stuckey, my friend, has had his life changed by that experience. At first it was catastrophic, and incredibly difficult. But now, as he makes sense of that experience, now Rob has it as grace...a lesson to him...not to become so proud and puffed up, but to stay focused and humble.

I think as disciples of Jesus, Jesus is pushing you and me today, on that hard edge of grace. So let's go into the Scripture itself, and sort of "unpack" it. First of all, we start with Jesus in public. And the Pharisees come to Him, and ask Him a question. They ask Him about divorce. And Jesus says: "Well, what's the answer?" And they kind of blow it, don't they? They're testing Him, but they tell Him the answer. So they look silly. It's like a kid coming up and saying: "Do you know this?" And you say "Well, what's the answer?" And they tell you the answer. You realize that they're not really looking for the answer. This is public danger for Jesus, in His teaching...in part, because questions of divorce, pushed on legitimacy with the rulers. Because the rulers at that time, used marriage to cement treaties and alliances. And they would change marriages, from time to time, to do that. In the background of this conversation is John the Baptist, who got swept up into death and execution, because he answered a question about divorce in a way that allowed him to be brought into custody. So Jesus knew that this was very, very, difficult...that they were trying to trap Him in a way that was about life and death.

And we see how Jesus navigates that entrapment. He doesn't let go of His integrity, but He doesn't fall into the trap. And then Jesus, as he does...living this life action and reflection...then Jesus moves out of His time of action with the larger crowds, and he goes in, more quietly, with the disciples. And the disciples say: "What were you talking about?" And here's where the disciples expected Jesus to say: "Don't worry about it. I was just giving them trouble." But He doesn't! Here's where Jesus pushes the disciples even harder, and shows them the Law--the tough mirror of the Law. In that mirror, all of us fall short. All of us, are like Rob was, before his statue of Moses--all puffed up. The Law shows us, that we cannot live a life of grace on our own...that's there's a certain incompleteness to us. And Jesus doesn't let the disciples off the hook--he raises the standard, and pushes them harder...essentially telling them that without God, you will not be complete. And so, they have no wiggle room. It's as though their statue has been smashed. And they're sitting there with the pieces. And some of us see that, and read these words, and feel that same experience of sort of...deflation.

But the passage doesn't end there, does it? It's interesting...it moves towards the children. The children are coming around to hear Jesus. And what are the disciples doing? We can read through the lines...the disciples are being kid of rude, and rough with these children, and pushing them away. Now there's something else hidden in the text: if children are there, then their mothers are there. So, having children there, was a way to be fully inclusive to the message. The disciples were pushing children and women away, so that they could be there exclusively special with Jesus. And he says "No." "No." "You cannot create a nobody--a non-person (and children were non-people at that time; they had no status). You can't decide who has status, and push them away. Jesus says, "Everyone will come to me." And they just learned the lesson, from the Law Je-

sus pushing on them, the lesson about divorce...saying "This is the Law. This is where you will be." They just hear that, and then they go right out, and try to exclude someone else. So He takes the children, and He blesses them. The power of blessing comes through in this Scripture...of bringing people back into a relationship with God...by reaching out to others, not by nursing their wounds.

A while ago, we planned to launch our Annual Giving Campaign today. And we have known we were going to do this, but we did not read the Scripture. So when I read the Scripture, I first went..."Uuuuhhhh, a great way to start our campaign..." But when you really look into it, it's fascinating. Because our campaign theme this year, is "Counting Our Blessings." It's not "Count Your Blessings." It's counting our blessings. It's an active, ongoing invitation to live your life the way Jesus invited the disciples to live--to not create outsiders, and zones of exclusion. But to admit to your own need for God, by counting our blessings together.

So I invite you, as Jesus invited the disciples through demonstration in the Scripture today. I invite you to join us in counting our blessings. Imagine, that you actually take this to heart, and see this as a way to practice grace...a faith practice of grace...when you're out of control, and God's in control. That's when blessings come. So, as you count your blessings, imagine at the end of each day...you write them down. And you don't get too uptight about it...or too thorough. So you have three or five a day, upon reflection. You walk by the dresser, you write them in the book, go to sleep, thinking about your blessings. Then the next day you do the same thing. And day after day after day. Then imagine down the line...you have already died...your life on Earth is over...and your grandchild, or your nephew, or a friend of your brothers or sisters, or someone...finds that notebook. And begins to see you, through your blessings. What would they find? What kind of world would they be invited into? And what would happen to you, over the days of your life, if you counted that way?

I believe there's a spiritual process that happens when we count our blessings. I brought it into a sermon one time this summer. I want to bring it back for just a little bit. It's something that St. Ignatius taught us. Ignatius taught us that if we really get focused, cognitively, on counting our blessings, and if that becomes a rhythm of life--like our breath--which takes a long time to make counting our blessings that natural. But St. Ignatius showed us that if we do that...that prayer practice of counting our blessings...in a cognitive way...that at some point, those blessings, and our awareness of life as filled with blessings...at some point, they move to our heart. And as soon as they move to our heart...as soon as the profound awareness that we are deeply blessed...moves to our heart, our heart opens. It's almost mechanical. You cannot have a deep sense of blessing in your heart, and keep it closed and hard. It opens automatically. And then you begin to notice the children of this day, the people who are without status, the non-people. They're probably homeless. They probably smell different than you. They're a different type of person. They're probably someone you're afraid of.

But when that sense of blessing moves into your heart, you can't help it. You begin to open. And your life is even more blessed. Your life has more texture. The possibilities...the connections...the people who bring grace to you, are expanding.

And so we invite you into this ancient practice, that Jesus demonstrates in the Gospel today. Look yourself in the mirror. And be clear about your failings. Because if you're not, God will help you. God will help you get to that place of..."uuhhh--I need help." And then when you're at that place, know that you are at the gateway to blessing. Count those blessings. Help us as we are counting our blessings together. And over time, you will notice your heart opening. Life becoming more rich...the actions and surprises and delight of God...appearing in places you had never known to look before. You will live a life that is blessed, as you count your blessings...especially when the tough, difficult side of grace opens your heart.