

Sermon
8 Pentecost—Proper 12-A
St. Andrew's, Methuen
July 26, 2020
William Bradbury

1 Kings 3:5-12
Psalm 119:129-136
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

From our Collect this morning:

O God, the protector of all who trust in you, Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal."

How do you understand "**so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal**"?

My hunch is that many folks think that prayer is asking God to help them be nice and to toe the moral line, so the pearly gates will open for them after they die. This view is given urgency because they believe God is just a hairsbreadth away from throwing them into the fiery lake of eternal conscious torment. So, the prayer is understood as saying, "**Lord, help us get through this life on earth so that we end up in heaven.**"

This is not a wrong understanding, but it is incomplete and can lead to dangerous consequences. This worldview can create a person that is so focused on getting their religious ticket punched for the next world, they lose the ability to see God's presence in this one and especially to see God in the suffering of those outside their tribe.

This creates a persona with a false piety covering a hard shell, which we easily spot in others, say in tele-evangelists, but not so easily in ourselves.

In other words, only looking for God in the next life we become like those Jesus calls out in Matthew 23:

²⁷ "Woe to you...hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the

dead and of all kinds of filth. ²⁸ So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

It takes people who are split in this way in order to crucify Jesus or to lynch Black men and women with a clear conscience. Only those pious on the outside and violent on the inside can murder on Friday and go to church on Sunday.

I just finished reading a devastating book by theologian James Cone called The Cross and the Lynching Tree, in which he lays out the connections between the lynching of 3500 Blacks between 1882 and 1968 and the lynching of the Son of God by a state-church mob.

One horrific story that troubles me is a lynching that took place in Valdosta, which is south Georgia, in 1918. Mary Turner, 8 months pregnant, “Protested vehemently and vowed to seek justice for her innocent husband’s lynching. The sheriff arrested her and then gave her to the mob. In the presence of a **crowd that included women and children**, Mary Turner was “stripped, hung upside down by the ankles, soaked with gasoline, and roasted to death.”

I will spare us the really gruesome details of what happened next.

Anti-lynching activist Ida Wells said, “Our American Christians are too busy saving the souls of white Christians from burning in hellfire to save the lives of black ones from present burning in the fires kindled by white Christians.” Cone, page 128

This split that allows people to both worship Jesus and lynch Mary Turner reveals the tremendous pain that must reside in their souls.

I think here of Franciscan Richard Rohr’s call to all of us: **“All great spirituality is about what we do with our pain. If we do not transform our pain, we will transmit it to those around us.”**

The good news is that God in Christ enters our pain, forgives our sin, and heals our split souls, in order to transform our pain, break the cycle of violence and create the Beloved Community. **This is the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus brings on earth.**

Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

So where can we find the field that holds the great treasure that is worth everything we have? That field is the deepest place of our being, the inner sanctum of the soul.

But when we only pay attention to what is **outside** us, we never find what's inside us. If we are paying attention only to food, finances, work, house, sports, politics, pandemic, health, and superficial worship, **we will never discover our True Self, which is Christ in us, the hope of glory.**

To go through things temporal without losing things eternal requires us to pay attention to our inner life in order to see Christ in each experience we have and in each person we meet. To see Christ shining beneath the surface of everything our eyes see and our hands touch.

It is easy to see the light of God in a newborn, but hard to see Christ, in our own brokenness and pain, because we keep ourselves too busy to look. **And when we don't see Christ within us, we won't see the Divine Light in the suffering of the stranger.**

We cannot save ourselves from our brokenness, only Christ Crucified and Risen who suffers with us can do that.

Saint Paul says today: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

Therefore, Jesus calls us to go into the cave of the heart: through deep prayer, Bible study, Holy Communion, compassionate service to let the Spirit of Christ heal our souls and train us to be ambassadors for the Beloved Community.

I invite you to silently join me in this famous prayer from Saint Augustine's classic spiritual autobiography, Confessions, written around 400. Let us pray:

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new,
 late have I loved you!
 You were within me, but I was outside,
 and it was there that I searched for you.
 In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created.
You were with me, but I was not with you.
 Created things kept me from you;
 yet if they had not been in you, they would not have been at all.
 You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You
 flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness.
 You breathed your fragrance on me;
 I drew in breath and now I pant for you.

I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more.

You touched me, and I burned for your peace. Amen

Confessions, Saint Augustine of Hippo