



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday July 27, 2014 - Trinity 6

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.**

The passage selected for the sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:

“Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there remember that thy brother has ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, and be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.”

St. Matt. 5:23-4

There is always a little bit of a stunned quality to the service on the Sunday we read this Gospel. We wonder if we really shouldn't head for the doors and put our house in order before we can bring our gift to the Altar. We look from side to side and wonder whether if our neighbor made the move to leave, that we would have the courage to follow, knowing we have reconciliation that we need to attend. Be at Peace. Stay in your seats. We can, and need to do, a much better job of reconciliation and forgiveness, but this service is not about our gifts. This service is about God's gift to us, which He means for us to have, though He knows we are undeserving. In fact, He offers us this gift, the Eucharist, His life to be in us, so that we can begin the process of transforming into the people He created us to be. It is only by the grace of the gift that we are about to receive that we can even imagine fulfilling his command.

That doesn't mean we should take this admonition lightly. Though the gift we receive today is dependent only on the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the gift that we are meant to be, which is the first fruits of God's love sent forth to convert the

world, does absolutely require amendment of our hearts, and thoughts and lives. This Gospel is particularly a warning against hypocrisy, especially hypocrisy in our faith. The sad distance between the people we are, and the people we profess to be is the single greatest obstacle to spread of the Gospel. Remember the admonition, preach always, and if necessary, use words. Ultimately, the Gospel is not spread best by word of mouth. The Word, capital W, is manifest to the world by the way we live, and by the way we humbly strive to narrow the gap between the way we live and the faith we profess.

The Temple worship that was dominated by the scribes and Pharisees had become scrupulous. The dietary laws and worship rituals had become so complex, so time consuming, that compliance was a full time commitment. Only those who could afford to make the Law their life could hope to meet the requirements. The Pharisees and scribes used their wealth and privilege as badges of honor. Their status in the religious hierarchy was supreme, and from their position of privilege, they looked down on the working people, the Publicans and the “sinners” that they felt were beneath them. Sin in the eyes of the Pharisees was lack of position and money, prestige and pride. That is why the Apostles were so shocked when Jesus told them it would be hard for a rich man to go to heaven. In that culture, since only a rich man had the time and means to satisfy the Law, it seemed impossible for anyone but a rich man to go to heaven.

The Apostles were shocked to learn that keeping the Law meant only two things, to love God with all their heart and mind and strength and to love their

neighbors as they loved themselves. Heaven without earthly prestige, position and power was revolutionary and radical. That is why the Pharisees hated and opposed Jesus, even in the face of the miracles He performed, because Jesus was tearing down the fabric of their privilege and pride. He made heaven accessible to the humble and meek. In fact, this admonition against spiritual pride comes immediately after the Beatitudes, where Jesus tells us humility, meekness and suffering are gifts that please God.

Of course, the lesson doesn't stick with the Apostle's. It is not much later than the Mother of James and John starts the jockeying for position for the seats at the right and left hand of Jesus. His brothers and cousins goad Him to exalt Himself at the Feast of Tabernacles. The Pharisees commit the sin of pride, looking down on their brethren, but the disciples commit the sin of looking at Jesus as the vehicle for their ambition. The disciples are less concerned with correcting the hypocrisy of the temple than they are with having a turn at being on top in the eyes of their city, riding the coattails of this new Messiah and his earthly reign. It is only by the grace of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost that the eyes of the Apostles are really opened, and they can live lives of simple sacrifice and love, ultimately giving even their lives for the sake of their love for Jesus and for each other.

If we can understand the admonition Jesus issued in His post-Beatitude sermon to the disciples, maybe our hearts and eyes can also be opened to the message He has for us. We have to be sensitive to our own inclination to hypocrisy. We have to be consistent between the character that we show the world and the character we share in this building. We have to be sensitive and kind to each other. Even the littlest gossip dissolves all professions of love we make in the services we attend. We have to

be kind to those people who are not in our social circles, especially those who seem to have little to reward us with for our attention, but their appreciation.

Jesus ends this discourse with the command that we love even those that hate us and hurt us. There is no great glory in loving only those who do us well. We have to be attentive and loving even to those who have wronged us. Of course, the places we most readily find the people who have wronged us are in our families and our parish. If we would not be hypocrites, if we would not be Pharisees, we have to forgive and love even those hateful people who have treated us badly and hurt our feelings. You know, the brother or sister we don't trust, those people at the "other service", the priest who was too self absorbed to console us when we needed him, those are the people we have to be reconciled to, to forgive and to ask for forgiveness.

What Jesus asks of us, demands of us, is difficult. Reconciliation with those who hurt us, humbly begging forgiveness from those we have hurt, these are burdens we can't manage on our own. That is why Jesus calls us to the Altar, call us to Common Prayer and worship, so that we can be transformed by the gift He gives so that our lives can become the gift to those He has brought into our lives. By His grace, we strive put away our hypocrisy and our righteous indignation, and become faithful vessels of His mercy, lively ministers of His love, even, and especially, to the people it is hardest for us to like. As we prepare the Altar, let us all pray, that He will open our hearts and dissolve our grudges, even the righteous ones, so that we love each other as He has loved us.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen