

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Disciples' Prayer *Part VIII: For Thine is the Kingdom**

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
March 28, 2010

Scripture Readings Acts 4:32-5:6; Acts 5:7-11 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Our lesson today is one of those places that you run across in Scripture that makes you wonder, "What in the heck am I a part of?" (laughter) I remember when I first came across this story. I'd seen it before, but at Seminary you have to spend more time with these stories, and you realize, "Oh my gosh..." Although, for stewardship season, we might pull it back out again - "Friends, give generously or else..." (laughter)

When we come across these places in scripture that seem so horrible, so unexplainable, those are the times to bring out the "magic decoder ring." I talk about this off and on. You need to *transform* what you were given - the mindset that this is history, that this is to be understood literally. These are the times when you know that this is not possible. You don't want to understand this literally. The "decoder ring" is saying that this is a sacred poem about the life process. Whenever you run across a passage that doesn't make sense any other way, you pull out the ring and say, "This is a sacred poem about the life process, some aspect of becoming a more loving person." Now stay with me on this. I know you're probably not buying it yet. So I'm going to go ahead and give you the punch lines, the three little points up front, because I know you're going to be sitting there scowling at me the whole time if I don't. (laughter)

The punch lines of the story from the side of loving mysticism are, number one, we're all one. We're woven together. That's number one. Number two: that which we hold back from ourselves and each other, from life itself - the parts that we hold back are hurting us, and actually killing us. And finally, (number three) our true happiness, our true joy is giving ourselves back to that common life. I'm thinking that this will be clearer as we go through the story.

One of the great foundations of the church (that we decided we didn't want to follow) is this idea that they started off purely socialistic. We don't see it, we don't want to hear it; it's right here in this passage, they took from the people who had ability and gave to those in need. They structured their community based on human need, not on rights of acquisition.

Now let me confess up front that I don't want to live in a commune. I don't want to live in a barter economy, I don't want to carry chickens around in my car and swap everything. I think it's a mistake to reduce these callings to pure politics. *But I think it's also a mistake to detach them from politics.* The idea that we are one family and we should care for each other and feed each other is good, but

there are lots of ways to do that politically, and a Christian has the option of choosing among them. However, a follower of Jesus *does not have the option* to not feed the poor. We can't just say they're lazy, they don't care, *they don't*...that kind of thing. What I'm advocating is not the politics of socialism but certainly the values of socialism. And after church if you ask me if I believe that politically, we can talk about that. I mean, capitalism has been such a success story, hasn't it? (laughter)

What I'm rejecting is capitalism as a world view. In essence, that we are individuals, separate from one another, that by following our own selfish self-interests we can maximize happiness, and that competition is the best way to bring out our finest selves.

And, oh yes, I forgot to mention the invisible hand of the marketplace that will regulate everything. That invisible hand is a religion, and if you surrender responsibility for how you treat your brothers and sisters to an economic system, I think that's idolatry. You have a huge spectrum in terms of political options that you can choose from to feed your brothers and sisters of the world, and how you can not kill them. But that's not an optional piece of the story from the beginning. We would know this if we understood that religion is about love and not about doctrine or rules.

Let me ask you this. If you were visiting a friend of yours and the last time you saw them they had ten kids, but now they had only nine. So you say, "Well, what happened?" and they answered, "Well Junior just couldn't keep up, he couldn't compete, so he starved to death. Now we were going to get him back, see, but he didn't save up enough from his allowance, (laughter) he wasted it, and so...(continuing unsettling laughter). Is there anyone here that wouldn't be horrified by that? You would never do that to someone you care about. What Jesus is saying is, "Care about everybody." So you would never enter into an economic worldview that lets people starve to death if you cared about them like you care about your own family, and Christianity *is* caring about them, at least in theory...at least in practice as much as you love yourself and those around you.

Adam Smith did not invent capitalism and Karl Marx did not invent socialism, at least not at the metaphysical level. When Moses came down from the mountain and said, "These are the rules and if we follow them we can live together in peace. We don't kill, we don't lie, none of those things." And when he got to the bottom of the mountain what did he see? *A golden calf*. McDonald's was already there... (laughter) waiting. On Palm Sunday we celebrate a choice between Jesus, who resisted violence and oppression, and Barabbas. In one of the legends, both of them are named Jesus, and you are choosing between Jesus, the son of Mary, and Jesus Bar – Abbas, son of a father who was a revolutionary. We still confront that choice.

We are finishing up a series on prayer, and what's very important to realize is when Jesus talked about religion, he wasn't thinking about something separate from your everyday life. He was saying that prayer meant going deeper into your reality. Prayer goes way beyond whether or not you believe anything. Its about how deeply you go into life, and feel your connectedness to others. What Jesus said was when you finish the prayer, you're saying, "Thine is the kingdom, (Here at St. Andrew's we say "kindom.") the power and the glory." That means *all possessions belong to this spirit, this common life*, whatever it is that breathes among us, every value and any power. Now that's a lot to take in, and I don't think that anybody wants to hear it at the start...that this life does not belong to us. In fact you have to go through enough life so that when you look in the mirror, you say, "You know, I'm not sure that this is my body right now. I don't have gray hair, I'm not pudgy, these aren't my wrinkles."

That's what happened to Buddha at a very early age, where he had been living ...I'm twisting this for Christian purposes, so I apologize to our resident Buddhists...but he goes out and one of his helpers is with him, and he sees a poor person. He says, "What is that?" And his helper says, "That's a poor person." And Buddha says, "Could that happen to me?" And the advisor says, "Yes." (I'm tweaking this story.) Buddha realizes that his own wealth is related to the poor person's poverty. He feels it. Then he sees a sick person, and he says, "What is that?" His companion says, "That's a sick person." Buddha says, "Could that happen to me?" and the answer was, "Yes, that could happen to you or to anybody." And then they see a dead person. Buddha sees that he had been a very young man, and he says, "Could that happen to me? What is that?" "That is death," is the reply, "and that could happen to you, and it will happen to everyone eventually." And then Buddha says, "What am I doing? What does this throne mean, what do these riches mean? What does this power mean?" See, that's also what Jesus is realizing at the temptation. When you fully consider that you're going to die, as much of a bummer as that may seem, it's kind of a fact, and if you will take that fact seriously, you can begin to understand what's important. But if you will not look at that fact, then everything will frighten you and scare you, and you'll clutch on to whatever you have to keep from facing that.

The lesson today also teaches us that what we hold back from each other, and from life, poisons us. You see, the early Christians started off trying to share everything and base everything on need. I don't know if that would ever work, but that's the target, and there is nothing you can do to change that. We want to use the "Holy Whiteout" to say that Jesus was a Capitalist, (laughter)...Sorry. They shared everything, and they based their economy not on rights of possession, but on human need. Again, you have lots of political options to look at, but the *target is not optional*. If you or I choose possessions over humanity, we have renounced the Savior. That's painful, but that's what Peter is saying to people in the Scripture lesson in Acts today. He's not saying that the Jews killed Jesus, he's saying that culture, that society, the economy, the military, us, the citizens, all of us, bring pain to the common body.

Here's a hypothetical question: Have you ever been dancing, and you're afraid of being laughed at, so you did a really bad job, so nobody would laugh at you? You were there going through the motions, but you weren't really dancing, so that if anybody laughed at you, you could say, "Well, I wasn't really trying."

Well, let's get a little more personal. Has anybody been in a relationship where you didn't fully open your heart because you didn't want to run the risk? Who hasn't? We hold our hearts back from one another to be safe, and we die in that process, because we need each other. When somebody says, "I don't trust life," or "I don't trust human beings," that's not just politics, that is religion. A politics that says you can't trust people or a theology that does that is not just wrong, it's sin. To say the poor brought onto themselves what they suffer is not just wrong, it's sin. When we tell the story of America and we leave out the things like slavery, when we leave out little things like the holocaust of indigenous people, when we leave out the fact that we stole the top third of Mexico and dispossessed a whole lot of people, and we can't understand why those people might have problems adapting, - see, we have to decide whether that 'us' includes everybody or not. If my 'us' does not include everybody, I'm not talking about Christianity.

Do you remember when you were a kid at Christmas, and you wondered how Santa knew to give all the crummy gifts to the poor children, and all the great gifts to the rich children? Do you remember how you felt? Did you have that experience of realizing at some deep level that your rich friends were

better than you, and your poor friends were less than you? They must be! I mean, Santa's proving it! All the doors opened for some of them, and all the doors closed for others! If you do not look at the economic system, if you do not look at the power system, if you do not look at the hierarchy, it takes you to a very evil place.

During the eighties, there was a movement in Christianity that substituted the philosophy of Ayn Rand and Adam Smith for the theology of Jesus Christ. It asserted that Jesus wanted flat taxes, (laughter) and it's still there! There are people who go to church every week and yet say that the poor have brought upon themselves their own misery. That's a disconnect.

What our passage today is saying is what's killing us is that disconnect. It's killing the environment. We will not save the environment within the capitalist system, it will not happen - not if by capitalism you mean corporate capitalism. *It will not happen.* If you do not find your humanity and rise up over against that system, then you will suffocate.

There are places in the world where people working within the corporate capitalist system have privatized water. They can then charge other people sometimes a quarter of their salary to get a drink of water, and also forbid the collection of rainwater. You don't think those people would do that to you? See, your 'us' has to include everybody. You were taught as a child that you are different because you're American. You were taught as a child that you're different because you're a Christian, and it's a lie. And it's not just a lie, it's a sin, because it contaminates everything. It eats us from the inside out. It's killing us.

The Gospel is a call out of that. Jesus said that when you pray, you start off saying, "Our heavenly parent", not "My heavenly parent," not "My personal relationship to Jesus," that's not Christianity. Christianity begins by praying to the common parent of us all...beyond any nation, beyond any religion, beyond any economic system, beyond any status system. That's the one you pray to. And then you end by saying, "All of my choices belong to you. Thine is the kingdom, the power, the glory," which means any political decision I make belongs to the common life. Any efforts at happiness I have belong in that context. Any ideas of power must fit within that context.

How do you do that? Prayer is going deep within yourself, and remembering first of all the wholeness of everything. It's remembering to put your decisions within the context of the whole. Let's say you're angry with me. And you've thought of a great insult that will embarrass me and make me feel small. When you put that decision within the context of the whole, you will not wound me, because you know my woundedness will hurt other people...right? Even if you don't like me, you will not wound me or hurt me or cheat me or rob me, because you know it doesn't stop there. And then you think down the road to generations unborn, what does this decision mean to them? It sure would change the economic situation, wouldn't it?

Here's another way: You consider what an action means to the least, to the weakest. That's hard to do when every magazine you pick up lifts up the most powerful and the most beautiful - when every television show, every movie, everything you see is pointing in the opposite direction. But that's the call of your own heart.

So when we see this terrible story, put on your "decoder ring." It's not about history; nobody died, these are mythical people to illustrate a fundamental truth of your life...three fundamental truths. We are one being. What we do to each other, we do to ourselves...this is fundamental to Christianity.

Number two: that life which we hold back from each other poisons us from the inside out...our life is giving ourselves. And finally, the true source of our happiness is *giving everything we have and everything we are* to the common life.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

**We use the word "kin-dom" (coined by theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz) because God transcends gender, and to emphasize our familial relationship with each other, both here and world-wide.*

The Disciples' Prayer Series

Part I: February 7, 2010, Matthew 6:7-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part II: February 14, 2010, John 14:1-4; 8-19 (*The New Oxford Bible*);

World Scripture: Chandogya Upanishad

Part III: Hallowed Be Thy Name. February 21, 2010, John 8:30-59; Exodus 3:13-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part IV: Thy Kingdom Come. February 28, 2010, Matthew 6:25-31 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part V: Our Daily Bread. March 7, 2010, Exodus 16:13-21 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VI: Forgive Us Our Debts. March 14, 2010, Matthew 18:21-35 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VII: Lead Us Not Into Temptation. March 21, 2010, Matthew 4:1-11 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VIII: For Thine is the Kingdom. March 28, 2010, Acts 4:32-5:6 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

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*We are Christ-centered,
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yet hear God's call to work for peace, and for universal
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*We take faith seriously,
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