



St. Paul' Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, FL
22 Pentecost - Proper 25 - - Year C - October 27/28, 2007
Jeremiah 14:(1-6)7-10,19-22; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

Less Hatred, More Humility!

Yesterday I had the privilege of participating in an event called “Telling Our Story.” It took place at Grace Episcopal Church in West Palm Beach and was sponsored by the Diocesan Commission on Anti-Racism of which I am a member....A centerpiece of the event was a display of Professor Ineria E. Hudnell’s *Traveling Museum of African American Life in Palm Beach County*. This exhibit contains over 500 pictures and photographs of African American life in Palm Beach County, Florida. The time span includes periods from the late 1800s and the Great Depression to the Hip Hop Era. Mrs. Hudnell is 86 years old. Her exhibit has been displayed in over 200 separate venues in various counties throughout the state of Florida. I hope to arrange for the display to come to St. Paul’s sometime, hopefully in February....

As part of yesterday’s “Telling Our Story” event a panel of four men shared what it was like to be African-American and to grow up in this area...They all, had a deep appreciation of their experiences here despite the reality of legalized segregation....Three of them had worked in the county school system. One of those men left the school system, went to law school and became a judge. One had been an executive with Pratt Whitney.

Even as they shared the positive experiences, they also shared their experiences of pain. One of them remembered coming back home after serving this country in Korea. He got on a county bus and took a seat in front of the notorious “white line.” The driver told him he had to sit in the back of the bus. He refused and got off that bus and has not ridden a county bus since.

Another was asked what his most painful experience was. Through a choked voice, he said it was driving with friends in a truck to “cut a friend down from a tree.” All had their stories to tell....To a person they had experienced incredible prejudice, humiliation and contempt from white society....And yet, even as these men told their stories they were able to transcend their anger and their bitterness and to reach out in love and do what they could to heal society’s racial wounds....It was a profound experience to be with them...They modeled something that I think we all need to see and experience....It’s called forgiveness. It is the work of reconciliation...How desperately we need that work in our world today...

Have you noticed in this country and around the world today that human beings too often seem incapable of engaging in civil discourse and showing respect for one another, even if we find it necessary to disagree?...Contempt has all too frequently become the norm in our relationships with one another.

I recently received one of those group e-mails that are so frequently circulated....This one was labeled "USPS Stamps." It had been forwarded to me by someone I know - a self-described Christian - and so I opened it. The lead-in to the body of the e-mail had a quote from Philippians, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*" (See Philippians 4:13).

The body of the e-mail read: "**This one is hard to believe....Scroll down for the text.**" I did. More text: "**If you forward one thing today, let this be it!**" I scrolled down some more. The image of a United States Postal Stamp appeared. It was blue and had gold Arabic characters in the center. In the upper right hand corners it read E-I-D. In the upper left hand corner its said 37 - USA. At the bottom, in English, it read, "Greetings."

I continued to scroll down the e-mail. In bold, upper case purple type, the e-mail text read, "**REMEMBER THE MUSLIM BOMBING OF PAN AM 103!**" Underneath that, "**REMEMBER THE MUSLIM BOMBING OF THE WORLD TRADE CENTER in 1993!**" I scrolled down, more words in purple. "**REMEMBER THE MUSLIM BOMBING OF THE MARINE BARRACKS IN LEBANON!**" "**REMEMBER THE MUSLIM BOMBING OF THE MILITARY BARRACKS IN SAUDI ARABIA!**" "**REMEMBER THE MUSLIM BOMBINGS OF THE AMERICAN EMBASSIES IN AFRICA!**" "**REMEMBER THE MUSLIM BOMBING OF THE U.S.S. COLE!**" "**REMEMBER THE MUSLIM ATTACK ON 9/11!**" "**REMEMBER ALL THE AMERICAN LIVES LOST IN THOSE VICIOUS MUSLIM ATTACKS!**"

The e-mail continued in red ink, "**NOW THE UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE REMEMBERS AND HONORS THE EID MUSLIM HOLIDAY WITH A COMMEMORATIVE FIRST CLASS HOLIDAY POSTAGE STAMP!**" I scrolled down some more. More text in large green type, "**REMEMBER to adamantly and vocally BOYCOTT this stamp When purchasing your stamps at the post office. To use this stamp would be a slap in the face to all those AMERICANS who died at the hands of those whom this stamp honors.**"

Last part of the e-mail. Large blue letters: "**REMEMBER to pass this along to every patriotic AMERICN [sic].**"

I later learned that, despite the impression given in the e-mail, this stamp was issued years ago...ironically, on September 1, 2001¹. It is one of a series of holiday stamps, that the United States Postal Service has issued over the years, including Christmas and Hanukkah stamps .

At the time of the stamp's release, Azeezaly S. Jaffer, Vice President of Public Affairs and Communications for the Postal Service, who was the person appointed to dedicate the stamp, stated in a Press Release "This is a proud moment for the Postal Service, the Muslim community, and Americans in general as we issue a postage stamp to honor and commemorate two important Islamic celebrations....The Eid stamp will help us highlight the business, educational and social contributions of the estimated six to seven million Muslims in this country whose cultural heritage has become an integral part of the fabric of this great nation."²

Of course, the e-mail sent to me was not interested in highlighting the business, educational and social contributions of the estimated six to seven million Muslims in this country or in honoring or commemorating, these Islamic holidays or any other.

The e-mail, I received was angry and in its anger, it wanted to denigrate....The designation “Muslim” was being used sweepingly and pejoratively, in effect condemning all Muslims as guilty of the crimes listed in the e-mail.

It is true that *some* Muslims were behind the horrific acts named, but *it was some Muslims – Islamists radicals – not all* Muslims. Millions of Muslims in this country were as grieved over the events of September 11 as any other Americans. Moreover, there are Muslims serving in the Armed Forces of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. The e-mail sent to me did not account for any of this or allow for any discernment....It condemned all Muslims....Because of its sweeping indictment of all Muslims, the e-mail I received was nothing more than a tool of hatred and bigotry. How often people fear that which they know little about....

I am pleased that the Delray Beach Clergy Association will be hosting a conversation with the authors of the book *The Faith Club*³ on November 15th....As you know, one of the author’s is Muslim.....This event will help counter the kind of contempt for others the e-mail sent to me evidences.....I hope you all plan on coming to *The Faith Club* event....Kathleen has been the principle organizer of it and it will be a very important evening for this community.

It is the rare person who is not guilty of some form of prejudice....It seems a sad and sinful part of human nature... We do it all the time, whether the distinctions are about religion, race, ethnic background, regional origins, social status, sexual identity, educational level, red or blue state preferences or any other of a host of other categorizations. We spend a lot of time labeling people, and often, all too often, we hold others in contempt...We lift ourselves up by putting others down....That’s what was going on in today’s Gospel reading from Luke.... It begins with the narrator telling us that Jesus told a parable “*to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt*” (Luke 18:9).

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income’” (Luke 18:10-12).

I am sure we have all met this kind of person....He is well-intentioned...He strives to do all the things he is supposed to do...He observes the law....He gives as he is supposed to give...He understands himself as a pillar and leader of the community. He will not even associate with those who are, well, undesirable, “not his kind.”

“But,” Jesus continues, *“the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”* (Luke 18:13)

Now as most of us know, this man’s status as a “tax collector” made him a scoundrel of the community...We should not imagine him as someone who is like an employee of the I.R.S. This man was not merely a civil servant charged with the responsibility of collecting people’s taxes. He was a collaborator with the Roman occupying force. He was a profiteer who was in cahoots with the enemy. He made his money by exploiting his own people in a privatized tax system that was rife with abuse and corruption.

As Jesus tells the parable, however, this man was completely aware of his shortcomings....Who knows what led him to make his living in such a distasteful way? That's a part of our problem as human beings....We are very quick to judge people based on very little information....We see one particular facet of a person and we jump to a conclusion about their whole being. Often the conclusion is negative.....Rarely do we recognize that people are like icebergs: there is often a great deal more under the surface than what you see above the waterline! The Tax Collector may have been engaged in a dubious line of work, but, as Jesus tells the parable, he is sincere in his faith and his confession....He acknowledges his shortcomings, beats his breast acknowledging his wretchedness and asks for God's mercy. Jesus concludes by saying to his listeners, "*I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted...*" (Luke 18:14).

Now, let's face it, the portrait of the Pharisee in this parable is a caricature, a cartoon....The qualities exhibited in his portrait are exaggerated to make a point....But what he represents is not all negative....There is value in trying to live an exemplary life....As people of faith, we are called to strive to live in holiness and righteousness....Righteousness is good...It's *self-righteousness* that is the problem...

The greatest flaw in the Pharisee's character is that he could only understand his righteousness by denigrating others. In doing this he thought more highly of himself than he ought to have....His real problem is not so much his high opinion of himself, it is his low opinion of others.....He held others in contempt...You can hear it in his prayer, "I thank you God that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector..." Just in thinking this, he is in violation of Jesus' greatest commandment (See Matthew 22:37).

Needless to say, the person described as the Pharisee in today's reading, never questions how his privileged status in the community might have come at the expense of others or through his exploitation of them...He certainly never gave any thought about how they had arrived at their condition...He never tried to empathize with them...He simply set himself above them....

Now, we shouldn't read this parable as though it sanctions the tax collector's immoral behavior....He confesses real sins....We can assume that he was sincere and meant what he prayed....He is fully aware of his own brokenness.....We don't know what becomes of him. It's a parable, so the story ends where it ends....Did he amend his life? I don't know. Frankly, it is not the focus of the parable.....

The focus of the parable is on the grace and mercy of God....The tax collector has not done anything that merits God's favor except to acknowledge his sinfulness and place himself at God's mercy....He is justified, not by his actions, but by God's gift freely given....

The Pharisee will not experience the fullness of God's grace, because the Pharisee doesn't feel any need for it....The Pharisee thinks it's all about him...It is an arrogant posture for him to assume....

Today's Gospel reading is about largely humility. Humility is a Christian virtue that is sorely misunderstood and greatly needed in our world today. Christian humility has to do with a right understanding of one's self, of one's gifts and talents, of one's shortcomings and weaknesses...It is also about understanding one's essential unity with all other human beings and the rest of creation....

Christian humility is not about being self-effacing and denying one has talents and gifts and skills....God has given each one of us these and God calls us to strive for excellence and to use the gifts with which we have been blessed to their fullest....But humility calls us to recognize that the source of all of these gifts is God and that others have been created in the image of God and have been blessed with gifts and skills too. It calls us to recognize that each person has a part to play in the grand scheme of things, whether they are black or white or Asian, Haitian, Hispanic, Latino, male or female, Jew, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist....

A major sin committed by the Pharisee was that he did not see the image of God in the tax collector and could not conceive of the possibility that God had blessed the tax collector with skills and gifts too...All he could do was see someone who was clearly not like him and treat him with contempt...

Today's Gospel reading invites us to take an honest measure of ourselves....God loves, all of us, even when we are sinful and do not live up to being the persons God has created us to be....God's desire for us is transformation and holiness....God's desire for us is also for us to love others as God loves us....to see in all others, even in those who we most fear or feel most threatened by, the face of God....

To be sure, it requires humility...It requires us to humble ourselves so that we can listen to the other, get to know him or her, but you know what? It's worth the risk...Every time we humble ourselves for the sake of the other, every time we act in such a way to lift up the other. Christ is lifted up and when Christ is lifted up, God's love is present for everyone to see.....

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1. Go to the United States Postal Service website at http://www.usps.com/communications/newsroom/2007/sr07_041.htm
 2. See USPS Stamp Release Notice #01-054 dated August 1, 2001 at http://www.usps.com/news/2001/philatelic/sr01_054.htm
http://www.usps.com/news/2001/philatelic/sr01_054.htm
 3. Idilby, Ranya; Oliver, Suzanne; Warner, Pricilla *The Faith Club: A Muslim, a Christian, a Jew – Three Women Search for Understanding* (New York, London etc: Free Press - A Division of Simon and Schuster, Inc. 2006).