

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia
October 12, 2014
Pentecost XVIII

Readings: Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

The gospel readings recently have been intense. Last week the parable of the vineyard illustrated this intensity with “wretches being put to a miserable death”. And this week, it is the parable of the wedding feast with this line: “Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

As we continue to build toward the end of the liturgical year, we will continue to hear readings like this. And I want to spend some time with it...but not today. For today, suffice it to say that the intensity and challenge of the gospel readings are meant to get across the importance of putting one’s faith in the Messiah. Such faith is not one option among a number of equal possibilities. But in the Messiah Jesus, God was uniquely at work, and that unique action presents us with a choice, an important and urgent choice. And it is a choice that is focused on how to live right now. But...I’ll get to that.

This morning I want to talk about Paul’s letter to the Philippians and I want to talk further about generosity. Last week, in my sermon, I said that generosity is good for you. And it is. Extensive scientific research at the University of Notre Dame proves the point¹. But of course, the need we have to give... as an overflowing of our faith... as an expression of our love of God... is most important. It is simply an added bonus that generosity also makes for happiness. God did not have to make us that way, but God did.

Now, there is also another side of the equation. And this week, I want to talk about that...what your generosity makes possible through this church. And I want to get there by first talking about Philippians, which was our epistle reading and has been for several weeks.

¹ <http://generosityresearch.nd.edu/>

I love Philippians. My very first semester at the Virginia Seminary, I took a course on Galatians and Philippians...we spent the whole semester on just those two letters.

Now you should know, that Paul's letters are the earliest documents we have in the New Testament. That comes as a shock to some people, but it is true. For instance, Philippians was written maybe in about 55 AD...some twenty odd years after Jesus' ministry. Mark's gospel, which by most accounts is the earliest gospel, was written in the late 60s. So, Philippians gives us this glimpse into the church 14 years before Mark was written and circulated.

Paul loved the church at Philippi and they loved him. It was the first church he planted on European soil, so that is significant. And, even though the Philippian Christians were poor and suffered hardships, they were very generous and Paul benefited from their generosity.

It is kind of funny, in the letter to the Philippians, how he thanks them. It seems like he is afraid he is going to give them swelled heads. So he is careful in his thanksgiving. He thanks them right after the passage for today...and by the way, isn't the end of today's passage stunning and beautiful? "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." How good it would be if we always had those words first and foremost in our minds.

At any rate, right after the passage for today, he thanks the Philippians, "I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but you had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty....in any case, it was kind of you to share my distress."

"You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant

offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

It is kind of fun to know, that in his letter to the Christians at Corinth, where Paul is not worried about swelling the heads of the Philippian Christians, he pulls out all the stops. In II Corinthians he says: “We want you to know...about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia (and that includes first and foremost, Philippi), for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry of the saints...”

So, at the risk of swelling your heads, I want to thank you for all you have done to further the ministry of Grace and Holy Trinity Church through your gifts. Without you, there would be no church at 8 North Laurel Street. With you, there are no limits.

You know, we are not like every business or every non-profit. I know a business, and the mission statement is, “We fix cars.” Clear enough. And there is a place for that...an important place. When my car is broken, I am looking for you!

There are non-profits, with a specific focus, such as “We are looking for a cure to ALS”, and having lost an uncle and a dear friend to that disease, I know that is important to seek a cure and I support that. I truly do.

But churches in general and GHTC in particular, are about more than doing just one thing. We are the Body of Christ, and there are arms and legs, and eyes and ears... there is, and should be a lot going on and more than just one thing. This is particularly true at GHTC. That is what I love about this church.

All churches share a lot of things in common. But GHTC is unique in a number of ways. Two things in particular make us unique. One is our location. We are in the heart of the City. If you don't care about heart failure and heart health, then don't come here. And by the way...if the heart has problems...eventually...it will effect the limbs...Chesterfield, Hanover and Henrico... you can put it off if you want to, but not for ever. But if you choose to come to GHTC, you don't want to put it off. You have made a choice to come here, you are committed, and you know that the heart matters.

The other thing that is unique about GHTC is YOU! This church brings together people from over 40 zip codes, from numerous professions and from many different schools, public and private. Through our worship, mission and numerous other interactions we forge lifelong relationships with people we may never have had the opportunity to meet except through GHTC. Oh my heavens what a blessing this community is! What a tragedy if it vanished. But it is not going to vanish, because of you. It is going to keep thriving. We are going to continue in our unique and special way. What does that look like?

Well, it looks like this...we are a safety net. We feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, provide medications, share Christmas presents with families in need, lead summer camps in Richmond and Belize, offer eye and dental clinics in Belize, hope to expand our medical outreach through our Friday soup kitchen, knit prayer shawls for the grieving and the sick, give baby blankets to our little ones, build chapels and playgrounds at schools in Richmond, and send youth and college students on mission trips.

We are an education center. We teach and learn through classes and small groups, forums, book studies, women's' groups and retreats. We teach and learn in age-graded classes and in on-line and inter-age activities.

We are a symphony. We offer glorious music very Sunday, host the Greater Richmond Children's choir and celebrate with concerts throughout the year.

We are a community. We have oyster roasts, barbecues, receptions, parties, retreats, the Best Breakfast in Richmond. We pray for one another, send cards, visit, and share life's joys and challenges.

We are a generous people of faith. What we do together transforms lives in this church, in Richmond and beyond.

We are a church. That is the core of who we are. Through weekly worship, fed by Word and Sacrament, we are sent out into the world, from this unique and wonderful place, to share God's love wherever we are and in all that we do.

When you are asked, by the Generosity Committee, to make a pledge, this is what you are being asked to support. My prayer, following Paul, is that "your abundant

joy can overflow in a wealth of generosity”. This church is special and it is unique. What a privilege it is to support this community by opening our hearts and our wallets. Amen.