



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity Ephesians 3:13-21 & St. Luke 7:11-17

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Last Sunday's lessons were very confrontational, very convicting. I not only know that because some of you told me they were; I know that because they convicted me of my own divided loyalties. You'll remember that I asked what you glory in, what you trust in, where your passions lie, and what people will remember you for when you're gone. St. Paul made tents for a living, but after he was dead people didn't remember him for his tents; they remembered him for his total commitment to Jesus Christ and for his total trust in his Lord and Saviour—a trust for which he gave his own life as a witness to the power of the Gospel. I think it's true for a lot of us, though, that if we died today we'd be remembered for our tents more than we'd be remembered for our complete trust in God. We say we trust in Jesus for our eternal salvation, but we still trust in ourselves, in our families, in our jobs, in our government when it comes to talking care of the ordinary things in life. And when we're struggling to meet our needs or when things like our health are out of our control, when our friends and families fail us, or when we don't get what we expect from the government we worry and get anxious. And brothers and sisters, as I said last Sunday, when we do that in the sight of the world, we send a mixed message and undermine our witness. The world asks, "Does he *really* trust his God?" "She tells me that Jesus has saved her, that he's given her peace, but I'm really not seeing it." "Why should I trust in Jesus? If he isn't really giving peace or security to my friend, why should I think he's going to give peace and security to me?"

As some of you said, those are some hard and convicting realities to face up to. They remind us that even as Christians we have room for growth—maybe *a lot* of room to grow. They poke us where a lot of us are most sensitive. Jesus tells us, "If

you're going to follow me, you really have to let me lead. You can't just give me the "religious" compartment of your life to control. You need trust me for everything. I know that you want to be in control of your family, your health, and your finances, but until you hand those things over to me—until you truly trust me with *everything*—I'm not really your Lord." And we hear him and our response might be to hold on even tighter to those things. We don't want to let them go. Maybe we feel like we *can't* let them go. We can give Jesus our souls to keep safe. After all, when we think about our souls, it's such an abstract idea. We can trust him for eternity, because eternity and heaven and hell are pretty abstract too. They aren't *here* and *now*. But my health problems? My relationship problem with my spouse or my kids? My finances? Those things are *real*. If I give those up, then I won't be in control. And we all want to be in control. But friends, if we're only willing to trust Jesus with the things we can't see and the things that are abstract or so far in the future that we already know they're not in our control, and if we're not willing to trust him with those things that are real today, that are important today, that have the potential to change how we live today—well—then Jesus isn't *really* our Lord.

The hard part about coming to this realisation is that somehow we have to learn to really trust him in order to give him *every* part of our lives. But brothers and sisters, that's exactly why he's given us the Scriptures: so that we can know him, so that we can know his character, and so that we can know he is faithful. That Bible you have in your hands is a giant book and it's full of God's revelation of himself. It's full of stories that tell us about his promises to take care of people if they will only trust him; and it's full of stories that show us that when those people really do trust God, he always takes care of them. This is the Gospel penetrating to every part of our lives. The Gospel confronts us with our sins and with our filthy souls, it humbles us, and it places before us the mercy of God in Jesus. If we will only trust in him, he will forgive our sins and cleanse our souls from all unrighteousness. This call to trust Jesus in every area of life is just the Gospel going deeper, showing us that God can take care of more than our souls if we will only trust in him for *everything*. As we heard last week, if we will only seek

God and his kingdom first, he will take care of the rest of our lives.

So I don't want to leave you convicted of having not trusted God for every area of your life. I don't want to leave you convicted of worry and anxiety but with no place to leave them and no confidence that God will take care of them. Today's Epistle and Gospel should give us the confidence to hand over to God the things we've always been afraid to.

St. Paul was writing to the Ephesians from his prison in Rome. Things did not look good for him and the Ephesians knew that they could just as easily be in similar predicaments themselves. If anyone had a right to be anxious and to worry, it was Paul as he faced the last days before his martyrdom. And living with the real prospect of persecution for their faith, the Ephesians had reason to be anxious too. But look at what Paul writes to them in 3:13:

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

Things look bad, but don't worry. If anyone was out of control of his circumstances it was Paul. Imagine how stressed out we get when things get out of control in our lives—and so often things that are so much smaller by comparison that sometimes it also seems silly to be afraid of them when we think of Paul's situation. And yet instead of getting upset, instead of being anxious, Paul bows his knees—he prays and puts his faith and trust in God. Look at verses 14 to 19:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...

The same Trinity who saves us—the same Father who calls us, the same Son who redeems us, and the same Spirit who gives us new life from the inside out—the same God-in-three-persons, the same blessed Trinity is with us as we face the hard things in life—as we face health problems, as we face financial problems, as we face problems in our relationships, as we face persecution—he is there.

Paul bows his knee to the Father—to the one “from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.” Have you ever thought about the fatherhood of God in that sense? Through Christ you are a son or a daughter of God—his child and part of his family. He’s *your* Father. The fact that we can understand that father-child relationship is because of the way God established men and women and families here in his creation. Paul knew that his heavenly Father would take care of him, because his own earthy father had taken care of him—that’s what fathers do.

Dads, let me make this clear to you: as an earthly father, God’s plan is for you to model his heavenly Fatherhood to your own children so that when your children think of their heavenly Father, they’ll trust in him because you’ve been good to them and taught them to trust you. None of us is a perfect father, but men, hear me: If we don’t model the Father’s love and care to our own children, we make it difficult for them to identify with our heavenly Father’s love and care. We bear a great responsibility.

We can see what happens when earthly fathers don’t live up to their divine model. I’ve been in churches that refuse to address the Father as “Father”. There are modern liturgies that now refer to the Trinity as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer—because people don’t like that word “Father”. Some of it’s because of feminism and the movement to make everything “politically correct”. “Father” is seen as sexist by some. But I’ve talked to others who struggle with seeing God as their Father because of bad experiences with their earthly fathers. I know people who have been abused verbally, physically, and sexually by their earthly fathers. I know people who were abandoned by their fathers—sometimes even before they were born—and then grew up with mothers who did nothing but bash fathers or men in general as being absent, unreliable, or dangerous. (That should be a warning for your mothers. You shape how your children will see God as Father too.) And so these people grow up and God comes to them as their true Father, but can’t identify with that in a good way—they fear, the cringe, or they simply find themselves unable to trust anyone called “Father” because of their experience with earthly fathers or because of what they’ve been taught about them.

The solution isn’t to ignore God’s revelation of himself as Father. The solution is to remember—and to teach people—that it’s earthly fatherhood that is supposed to model divine Fatherhood. God’s Fatherhood isn’t based on his mimicking earthly fathers. It’s the other way around. Earthly fatherhood is supposed to mirror God’s relationship with his children. We need to see the good in our earthly fathers as being good because it mirrors our heavenly Father, and when our earthly fathers fail, we need to recognise that they failed precisely because they weren’t modelling God’s Fatherhood like they were supposed to.

So when trouble comes, when we’re tempted to become anxious, when there are parts of our lives that we don’t want to give up to God and to lose control of, we need to remember that God is our loving Father. He’s the Father who sent his only Son, Jesus, to die for us so that we could be restored to his fellowship. He loves us that much and wants to take care of us that much. If we will only trust him, he will grant us, according to the great riches of his glory, to be strengthened.

And now Paul mentions the Third Person of the Godhead, of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. If we will trust God, he will—according to his glorious riches—give us strength through his Holy Spirit. It’s the Spirit who does the heavy lifting in the Christian life. Think about it: when we come to faith in Jesus as our Saviour, it’s because the Holy Spirit—according to the calling and election of the Father—has done the work of changing our hard, callous, stony, hate- and sin-filled hearts. It’s the Spirit who takes men and women who are born enemies of God—God-haters—and enters our lives and somehow does the amazing work of turning our hearts toward Christ. But the Spirit’s work doesn’t end once we’ve been turned to faith in Jesus. He continues to strengthen us as we deal with life. He never stops turning our hearts toward Jesus. He never stops giving and growing our faith.

Paul says the Spirit strengthens us from the inside out “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” That’s the Spirit’s job: he points us to Jesus and he applies Jesus to us—the Second Person of the Trinity. Originally he turned, he

regenerated each of our hearts and turned them toward faith in Jesus. That’s how we were saved. But that faith didn’t reach its pinnacle on the day you became a Christian. That faith needs to keep growing—needs to keep being strengthened by the work of the Holy Spirit. One day he gave you the faith to hand over your soul to Jesus for salvation—to trust your eternal destination to Christ. But as we grow in our faith, the Spirit is going to be showing us other parts of our lives that we need to trust to Jesus too. That’s part of his work of growing our faith—of strengthening us in our inner being. Brothers and sisters, don’t shut him out. Don’t smother his voice when you hear him asking you to give up control of this or that area of your life. He’s trying to grow your faith. If you stop your ears to his voice, if you insist on maintaining the status quo, you’ll stop growing in your faith. You might even start to slide backward. And that’s usually when the Father—in his goodness, wanting what’s best for you—starts piling things on and puts you in life’s pressure cooker, giving you more opportunities to respond to the Spirit by trusting your life and your anxieties and your pain to Jesus.

The big question is: Can we trust him? As I said, the Scriptures are full of story after story that God has given us specifically to teach us that we *can* trust him and that he *is* faithful to his promises—from Genesis to Revelation. I’m convinced that the more we steep ourselves in the Bible. The more familiar we become with all these stories of God’s faithfulness, the easier it will be to trust him. We have one of those stories about the saving power of Jesus in our Gospel lesson today.

St. Luke tells us that as Jesus was approaching a town he was met by a funeral procession. At the front of the processions was a weeping mother. Her only son had died. Consider what that meant in that world. She was already a widow. Her son had been her only source of security. Now he was gone. There was no CCP, no Old Age Security in that day. She was probably destitute or nearly so. What was she going to do for a living?

But Luke says that Jesus had compassion on her. He touched the bier and commanded the man to get up. And that’s exactly what the dead man did: he sat up and started talking. And Luke says that

Jesus gave him back to his mother. Jesus cares about us—and he doesn't just care what happens to us after we die. He cares about more than our souls. Over and over in the Gospels we see him taking care of the "here and now". He doesn't just forgive sins, he heals lepers, he restores sight to blind eyes and hearing to deaf ears, he raises the dead, and he even miraculously provides money to pay taxes. Granted that all these things were done to prove that he was God and to prove that he really could forgive sins, but all these things also teach us that we can trust him with every area of life—with every anxiety, with every sorrow, with all those things that we'd prefer to have control over. We can hand them over to Jesus and trust that he'll do a better job taking care of them than we ever could. Think about that. When that crying woman met Jesus on the way to bury her son, she was probably pretty anxious about what was going to happen to her. Did she settle for a comforting hug from Jesus? No. She gave her situation to him and he actually raised her son from the dead. I'm pretty sure she wasn't expecting that! But that's what happens when we're willing to give our lives wholly over to God. On top of it all, because Jesus did that amazing thing in her life, Luke says that the people were amazed and glorified God and word of Jesus spread all around Judea as a result. She became a witness.

If we would be willing to do the same thing, if we will trust in our Saviour—if we will truly let him be the Saviour of *every* part of our lives, we'll be able to be that kind of witness too. In the Epistle Paul goes on and tells us the purpose for all this:

...that you, being rooted and grounded in love, [that you, having *experienced* the good Fatherhood of God, the strengthening of the Holy Spirit, and the saving power of Christ] **may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.**

One of the best forms of advertising is the testimonial. Companies advertise their products by having people who have actually used them tell others how well

they work and how they've benefitted them. God wants us to experience his goodness and especially the amazing breadth and length and height and depth of the saving love of Jesus. The more we experience him, the closer we'll come to having some understanding and some appreciation for what God has done for us in Christ. The saints who have gone before us—especially those men and women who were willing to die for that faith—they understood it because they had experienced it. They appreciated it so much that they put their lives on the line to witness it.

So, brothers and sisters, trust in God. Trust the goodness of God as Father; let the Holy Spirit continue to turn your hearts toward Christ—not just for your souls but for everything; and make Jesus your Lord, really and truly. Don't just give him part of your life—give him *everything* that you might each day know better the length and breadth and depth and height of his love and each day become a more powerful witness to the world of what it means to have Jesus as your Lord and Saviour.

Let us pray: Father, we asked earlier in the collect for you to keep your Church by your help and goodness. Let that be so Father. Sustain each of us by your amazing help and goodness. Give us the faith to trust you in every area of life, that as you care for us, we might be living witnesses to your love and goodness. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.