

EMMANUEL EPISCOPAL CHURCH, STAUNTON, VIRGINIA
A KING WHO FORGIVES THE WORST THING YOU HAVE EVER DONE
Sermon by the Rev. Anne Grizzle, November 24, 2019

Preaching at Emmanuel Episcopal Church today indeed feels like coming full circle, coming home. For I grew up here at Emmanuel in Staunton. My family usually sat in the 6th pew back from the front on the right, where I heartily sang with my father Forest “I sing a song of the saints of God”. I remember learning the colors of the church year in Sunday school downstairs where there were three Anne’s in a class of 8. I was confirmed by Bishop Marmion right here. And then I went north of the Mason Dixon line to college at Harvard, then to Columbia in New York City for social work school. But I came back to Emmanuel to marry my college sweetheart David. Back in New York, while my attorney husband traveled daily down to Wall Street to work, I would travel north to Harlem to work at a place called Project Basement with children at high risk of foster care placement. Eventually we moved to Houston where my husband worked for 20 years with Continental Airlines and I worked as a family therapist while we also raised our three sons. Making the circle full, we returned 10 years ago to the east coast, to Washington DC and to our family farm in Lexington where we have built a retreat home, the Bellfry where we host many. And in returning, I was able to pursue a call to ordination in this diocese and be ordained a priest, almost two years ago Epiphany. Currently I have the privilege of serving as chaplain at Boys Home of Virginia in Covington, a mission many of you support as you give to clanging for change.

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in ordinary time before we begin Advent. On this day, we celebrate the lordship of Christ over all of heaven and earth. But Christ’s kingship (not a popular word these days) is different from the power plays we are familiar with in this world. This is a king who said the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, to care not for the most powerful but the least of these. This is a king willing to die for all of humanity, and as we heard in the reading of the letter to the Colossians, to reconcile all things, yes it says ALL things, to himself. Our gospel reading today has us at the foot of the cross as King Jesus is nailed and hanging, about to die. We watch, we listen to this scene. Two stories from my full circle journey came to mind with this gospel – two men in their own pain I bring to the foot of the cross with you today.

One day in Houston I got a call from Kathy McGlade, the director of Project Basement who had, like most of the staff, long since moved on to other jobs. She had gotten a call from Lisa Orloff, the court social worker, who was working with a young man who had committed double murder and could become the first person executed due to a recent new NY death penalty law. Kathy said, I don’t know if you remember him from when he was a little boy at Project Basement. I began to scroll in mind back to the many children I had worked with. When she told me his name – I will call him James to protect his identity – I remembered, oh yes, I remembered James very well. I had worked with him closely and particularly remembered his father’s drinking, his mother’s schizophrenia, and his own sort of lost childlike wandering, not at all violent but lost. Particularly vivid was one visit with him, during which I learned it was his birthday. I wished him happy birthday and offered to take him to the corner store where I bought him something pretty small, probably a pack of two chocolate cupcakes and a little toy airplane. He told me that was the best birthday he had ever had. My heart almost broke. Yes, yes, I told Kathy McGlade, I remember James. And I agreed to speak with Lisa Orloff if it would be helpful. I spoke with her, I wrote a report about his childhood as I knew it, and I asked her, “Lisa, how do you keep doing this work?” She said, “My mother told me you are more than the worst thing you ever did.”

James was convicted, sentenced to 50 years in prison but not given the death penalty. I have over the past thirty years written to him and traveled several times to visit him in various high security prisons in New

York State. When I talk with him, he is often depressed realizing the horrible crime he committed, how this has affected other families, and how he has messed up his life which seems worthless. Indeed one wonders in the face of such horror, is there any hope for James? Can such a horrible sin be forgiven? What would you say to James?

Much more recently, just last month, one of the young men at Boys Home, who was baptized last May, came to me in great distress. He had had a panic attack, lost weight, and was deeply worried he might have cancer. At the root, he felt this was a likely punishment by God for his sins, past but also some ongoing habitual sins he was finding hard to break. His deep angst at his sins, though of a much smaller nature, were much like that of James. What might our king Jesus, hanging on the cross, say to him?

Though you and I may not have committed double murder, many of us are disturbed in our souls by our own mistakes that haunt us, and we might worry that we are not worthy of the kingdom of God. Or we may hold within us anger or angst at what others have done to us or to others, harboring anger rather than hoping for forgiveness. I wonder what, in the words of Lisa Orloff's mother, what is the worst thing that you have done? What is the worst thing that another has done to you or those you love? We know God forgives, but just how far does that forgiveness and mercy extend??

Let's take my stories and your own worries or angers to the scene in today's gospel. Jesus is in horrific pain and close to his last breath. What is going through his mind and heart? Hatred and judgement for his murderers? Care for closest family? I cannot think of a sin more grievous than killing the king of glory – those who mocked, spat, beat, humiliated, and nailed Jesus to a cross. And these murderers have not even repented or asked for forgiveness. Yet Jesus is looking at them with compassion; his words from that cross ring out – "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." Picturing this scene, I am filled with hope – hope that the love of God can cover, the mercy of God can forgive anything -- anything!

And our hope for my friend James and the angst filled teenaged boy, or ourselves in our mental berating gets another poignant picture from today's gospel. Two thieves are crucified beside Jesus, one who mocks Jesus but the other asks, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom." And that thief (we don't know what he did but he was likely did some of some awful wrong) – was one of the first in paradise with Jesus.

Those two pictures, forgiveness for the worst sinners who have not even repented and the thief in paradise – they enable me to tell James, as Paul writes to the Romans, there is NOTHING that can separate him from the love of God or not be forgiven, and to my Boys Home young man and you and me -- the good news that Christ our King came to offer love and forgiveness so wide and deep and broad and high that we can giddily proclaim forgiveness for the least but even the worst thing we have ever done or another has done to us.

So on this Christ the King Sunday, we have a king of strong forgiveness. And as we come to confession, we can bring the worst thing we have ever done and offer it to that king of forgiveness. And as we come to the communion table we can eat the bread and drink the wine to be part of the feast of forgiveness from which our Jesus promised the thief – and to us as well – to be with him in paradise. Come taste and see this amazing forgiveness that indeed proclaims we are all so much more than the worst thing we have ever done – so deeply and widely loved by Jesus.

So I pray as Paul did for the Colossians – may you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power. For God is pleased to reconcile to himself ALL things, all things, whether on earth or in heaven by making peace through the blood of his cross. Amen.