

## A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost



*It was my great joy to spend this morning of the thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost with the good people of [Holy Trinity Church in Southbridge](#). I love these words that first appeared in a diocesan history of our congregations, *From The Blackstone to the Housatonic* and that now appear [on the parish's website](#): "It has been said that very little that is meaningful and lasting comes without a struggle and that has certainly been the experience of the parish of Holy Trinity Church."*

*Continued prayers for this parish as they prepare for a new chapter in their life together, and welcome a new priest into their midst.*



*Here is the manuscript for today's sermon:*

I wonder if it might be possible for us, on this lovely summer day, to go back in our minds eight months – back to the beginning of the bleak midwinter when there was snow on snow? I know that is a really cruel thing for me to ask, but can you go there with me for just a moment, or at least back with me to that familiar reading from the second chapter of Luke's Gospel on Christmas Eve?

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be*

registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, <sup>\*</sup> the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom God favors!’

Now even if you have resisted leaving this August day for that holy night, it is ok. Because it is those last words that I want to highlight – that song of the angels and a multitude of the heavenly host, the same song we joined in singing just a few moments ago, with all the company of heaven:

*Glory to God in the highest / and peace to God’s people on earth.*

Until this past June, I had served for more than fifteen years as rector of the Episcopal parish Holden that takes its name from Francis of Assisi, who is known among other things for a prayer he probably didn’t write but that nevertheless goes to the heart of how he lived his life: *Lord, make us instruments of thy peace*. That prayer, and Francis’ witness, are about learning to sing with the angels who announce the dear Savior’s birth. You and I are called to sing that song until we believe it, and then (with God’s help) to try to live it: by being instruments of God’s peace until there is peace on earth and good will for all.

Is this the sort of congregation where I could get an Amen to all of that? But here is the thing – back now to August 18, 2013, this summer day: if all this is true (and I do believe it is) then what in heaven’s name is going on in today’s Gospel reading? Didn’t Jesus get the memo? Has he forgotten the song of the angels and his purpose on earth and our purpose as his followers to bring peace and good will to all? Yet Jesus says (at least according to the same Luke who gave us that birth narrative) –

*Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.*

I will come back to this text, I promise. But before I do that I want to point out something very important, and I want to tell you that it doesn’t matter much whether you call yourself a so-called “conservative” or a so-called “liberal” when it comes to the Bible. Always we are interpreting the Bible, as we must—first and foremost by trying to hear it within its own larger context. In other words, we can’t listen to today’s gospel, but forget the song of the angels. The Bible is not given to us to offer easy answers; it’s deepest meaning is to generate better questions. We are meant to read the Bible like Jesus and St. Paul and the rabbis did and as Richard Hooker did: critically, and measured against our experience of God and rooted in the larger traditions of the community.

When Jesus says, “you have heard it said, an eye for an eye, *but* I say to you...” he is reflecting on the teachings of Moses—his Bible—yet pushing his hearers to a new place. When St. Paul says that he was under the law, but is now ruled by grace, he’s doing the very same thing. Context matters. To come to this House of

God on this thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost and then leave this place today and say, “where there is peace I am going to go out and sow seeds of division and pick a fight with my mother-in-law because that’s what Jesus said to do” would be counter to the Gospel. So please do not go out and do that!

Perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker that says: “*God said it, I believe it, that settles it.*” I commend to you a much better way to come to God’s Holy Word, and that is by praying over and over and over again one of my very favorite collects in *The Book of Common Prayer*, which can be found on page 236:

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, so that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ...*

We read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the words of Holy Scripture, so that again and again they might bring us back to the Word-made-flesh, to our Savior Jesus Christ. *We worship a person, not a book.*

And yet this person –Jesus of Nazareth—said these words we heard today (or at least Luke says that he said them!) What might Jesus mean here? How might we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest these words in a way that allows us to hear good news today, in a way that draws us closer to the love of God and neighbor?

Jesus is on the move: he has set his face toward Jerusalem. It would have been much easier to stay in Galilee and get tenure and retire as a wise old rabbi. But at the center of our life together there is a cross. Jesus is clear about that and resolved and so where we are in Luke’s narrative is that we are getting closer and closer to the place of a skull, to a hill outside of the city walls of Jerusalem.

If you were in church two weeks ago then you heard the story of someone "along the way" saying to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And then he said to them, "Take care! Be on guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

And then last weekend we heard Jesus say to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Both of these texts deal with the idol of money – a topic we sometimes prefer to avoid in church. If we talk about money it seems to some as if we are not being “spiritual” enough. Yet Jesus talked about money more than anything else except for the Kingdom of God. And he talked about money way more than he ever talked about sex. I think the reason for that is that he knew that there are things that can keep us from God; that is, by definition, what an idol is. And when we give our allegiance to what is not God, we get into trouble.

So you all know that the Bible doesn’t say that “charity begins at home,” right? That tends to be how we want it to be: we want to take care of our own needs, and then we take care of our own flesh and blood, and then if there is a little left we might show a little bit of charity to the stranger. Of course along the way it’s easy to confuse our wants and our needs, but that’s another sermon, for another visit.

But here is the thing: when Jesus says seek first the Kingdom of God, he means that. Our friend Francis of Assisi understood that, by the way. And so he gave all of his stuff away because he knew it was keeping him from loving God. And do you remember what happened when he did that? It created a huge public rift with his father, who basically said “listen Frank, I worked hard for what I have and I did it for you and your brother—and this is how you treat me?” And maybe he had a point or maybe at least we can feel some of his heartbreak. But Francis, beloved Francis, told the old man he had just one father—his abba in heaven. *From now on five in one household will be divided...father against son and son against father...*

When we really do put God's Kingdom first, it will sometimes bring conflict before it brings peace. Sometimes even in our own families. In such moments we draw strength in remembering that for the Baptized, water is thicker than blood: which is to say that while the ties of family are important, they are not ultimate.

There is a difference between being a peacemaker and someone who is always avoiding conflict by trying to "keep the peace." We must never be naïve about that and I think that is where we begin to hear the "good news" in today's Gospel reading. To be truly a peacemaker will sometime mean you will find the fire hoses turned on you. The trick in such moments is to respond in love, even to violence and fear. If we are truly being peacemakers, there will always be some struggle and conflict and heartache along the way. And yes, even some division, sometimes within our own families, before we find our greater unity in Christ. The ultimate goal is always peace on earth and good will to all. There is no need to pick any fights with anyone—not in our families and not in a congregation. But when the fights find us, we do well to keep our eyes on Jesus. At such times we need the gifts of resolve and determination, and hope, in the midst of all that threatens to undo us.

*Blessed are the peacemakers.*