
With Us Always

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Feast of St. Philip – Year C

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's been on my mind since the end of summer. It's a witty little remark that I preached about in August. "I was the perfect parent," it begins. "I was the perfect parent!" And then there's that twist in the next line—the punch line:

I was the perfect parent ... *before* I started having children.

Here's how one mother comments on that line in her blog on the internet. She starts by recalling how critical some people get when they see parents who walk around in public with a leash on their children; the way we leash our pet dogs to keep them from running away. "Remember judging parents who leash their kids?" she writes.

"Leash babies? How hard is it to keep track of your child?"

Then, you spent five minutes terrified because when you bent over to check a price tag, your child bolted and was nowhere to be found. You were crying in the store, as a fellow parent who had been there before, helped you find your child knocking things off a shelf five aisles away.

She goes on to make the point stronger with a few more examples.

I miss the days when it was easy to judge the family three tables away with the wailing child—the good ole days when I was a perfect parent, before my children were born ...

And here's her example that grabs my attention because it's still with me today.

Being a parent is ... smiling at the crayon wall art your offspring drew while you were doing the dishes. It is leaving those wall scribbles up on your once-white wall because of how proudly your child beamed when their little hand grabbed your pant leg and pulled you to see it. (<http://www.scarymommy.com/perfect-parent/>)

Well, people, I'm slightly embarrassed to tell you this. But my granddaughter will be away for a year and I still have not cleaned away the drawings on her bedroom wall. I've left them there on that wall despite the fact that it was a couple of years ago that we chastised her for not using paper instead of that wall to draw on.

Well, you see how it is with me. I'm hooked as a grandparent and a former parent! My love and commitment to this young person in my life have a claim on me that won't let go. Now here's where that kind of love and commitment connects to a particular gospel text appointed for today.

Today is our patron-saint day at the Cathedral of St. Philip: the Feast of St. Philip the Deacon and Evangelist who baptized the Ethiopian eunuch on his way back home from his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. For that observance we read from the gospel of Matthew; in fact the very last verses of Matthew's gospel. And here's where my parental love connects specifically to the final words that conclude that entire gospel. It occurs in the following setting: where the eleven disciples have been

instructed by the resurrected Jesus to go to a certain mountain where he meets them and delivers his final message:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:16, 18-20).

“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” On this Sunday, as we baptize young children at the Cathedral on this Feast of St. Philip, it is that final line that gets my attention. And it gets my attention because it summarizes God’s deep love for all of us; God’s abiding with us always, no matter what. Coincidentally it’s that abiding love that Isaiah also proclaims in other reading appointed for this feast day: our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 53 called the ‘Song of the Suffering Servant.’

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted ...

For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people ...

When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring ...

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities. (Isaiah 53:7-8, 10-11)

“And he shall bear their iniquities.” It’s the last line of our readings that gets my attention today; the last line of our Old Testament alongside the last line of the gospel of Matthew. So of course I connect-the-dots between the two: between Jesus saying at the end of Matthew, “And remember, I am with you always,” (Matthew 28:20) and Isaiah’s prophetic last line, “And he shall bear their iniquities” (Isaiah 53:11).

Looking now at our children, grandchildren and godchildren, the word “iniquities” may not occur to us as a defining feature of their life and growth. But as disciples of Christ we know better, don’t we? We know it’s not just drawing on the walls or running away in stores that will mark their lives in the coming years. Sooner or later there will accumulate the kind of deeds and behaviors that mark our own lives; the kind of actions for which we make our confession every time we pray The Lord’s Prayer: “And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Matthew 6:14-15; Luke 11:4). Whether it’s the words “iniquities” or “trespasses,” or “sins” or “transgressions,” or non-biblical words like “shortcomings” or “character flaws,” we know that our young people will incur the same human characteristics that we all share; that is, the same kind of opportunities to be forgiven “as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Now right here it’s providential to notice a final connection occurring in our scriptures for today. But this is a connection with a different set of readings. It happens that our regular readings appointed for today, apart from the Feast of St. Philip that we are observing here at the Cathedral, include the story of Jesus curing the ten lepers. And it’s precisely here that we can appreciate from another angle what it means for God in Christ to abide with us and to bear our transgressions along with us.

For leprosy in the ancient world was the worst case scenario for oneself and for one’s community. Both for oneself and for one’s community leprosy presented the most challenging circumstances for disease and healing. Because the disease was so virulent and the cure so unlikely the victims had to be segregated and left to rot in their own skins. So the fact that Jesus was able to heal them and send them on their way rejoicing is faith-affirming even for us here today.

In contexts both ancient and contemporary therefore, as it was then so it is now: Jesus does what no one else has been able to do for us, and through him God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. It’s especially reassuring for these baptismal candidates here today, and for their sponsors to know that, no matter what happens in their lives Our Lord will abide faithfully, to be with them in and through all things.

Church friends, and all you parents, grandparents and godparents, just as effectively as those ten lepers were cleansed in their rotting bodies, baptism for us is the sacrament whereby we are cleansed in our soiled memories and defiled consciences. That’s right, and that’s part of why we observe the focus on baptism today—on this our patron saint’s feast day. For just as I have proclaimed the ‘good news’ of Jesus’ power to cleanse both our souls and bodies, so in today’s epistle

appointed for the feast of St. Philip we here the good news of God in Christ proclaimed to the Ethiopian eunuch. As the reading says:

The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing (Acts 8:34-39).

And so we too go our way rejoicing in this good news: that baptism has been provided for us as the sacrament whereby we are cleansed in our conscience (1 Peter 3:21); cleansed from the entire disposition that draws us into transgressions against one another; against God and our own best selves. For in baptism we perform the scripture that Isaiah prophesied millennia ago:

When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring ... (Isaiah 53:10)

In almost those very same words St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:

For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,* not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ ... (2 Corinthians 5:12, 17-20)

And so thanks be to God, that there abides with us the One who claims us as God's own "offspring"—in the words of Isaiah; and as God's "new creation" in the words of St. Paul. All of us are children of this awesome God-parent who cleanses us in our conscience and in our communities; cleanses and restores us from everything that might continue to separate us from one another. And the good news in Christ is that he continues to do so as an endless source of new creation—of resurrection life. For as he proclaimed to those first disciples on the holy mountain he proclaims also to us today:

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20).

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.