

## THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF GETHSEMANE

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### Sermon for 18 August 2013

**The Rev. Theo Park**

Do you ever notice, those of you who read contemporary fiction,  
that many writers today start their work with a short quotation, right at the beginning,  
a quote usually meant to sum up the meaning or theme of their book,  
sort of like the collect for the day.

If you're like me, a lot of the time you pass right over it,  
or remember and go back to it only after you've read a ways into the book.  
But there's one contemporary novel with an opening quotation  
that I find impossible to ignore. It's John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*,  
which begins with this quotation from Leon Bloy:  
"Any Christian who is not a hero is a pig."

Bloy was a French novelist, critic, polemicist, a fervent Roman Catholic convert  
who preached spiritual revival through voluntary suffering and poverty.

"Any Christian who is not a hero is a pig."

It seems to me that this fits right in with the lessons today.

They're all full of similarly hard sayings,  
of demands for faithfulness and of the promise of judgment.

In the first two readings and in the Psalm,  
the authors basically have God saying that behavior is important,  
that God has some very real expectations of us,  
and that what we do matters.

So we hear all that talk of discipline and of judgment.

Then there are the words Luke gives Jesus about division, and about fire,  
about what he must undergo and his impatience to get on with it.

All in all, not our usual Sunday fare.

No gentle Jesus, meek and mild,  
no easy yokes or light burdens,  
no kind words about love and forgiveness.

This is the other side of the Gospel, the other side of the faith;  
the side that we don't embrace quite so willingly.

But there it is and it is very much a part of the whole Christian message.

And we need to hear it.

We simply cannot ignore or overlook the reality that in our tradition,  
God offers us a vision of what human life can be, and what it should be.

We pretty much know what that vision is.

It has to do with shaping ourselves as people by living faithfully

with God at the absolute center of our lives.  
It has to do with telling the truth;  
and with living not for ourselves alone, but for another.  
It has to do with holiness of life and with a passionate concern for the poor.  
It has to do with the way we take care of the stuff and the people God gives us.  
It has to do with all of those things folks in the lessons today  
were being criticized for not doing.

What it all really comes down to is the imitation of Christ—  
Jesus living his life again in us and through us.  
Our tradition tells us that God is very serious about this vision of life.  
God expects us to strive to conform our lives to it.  
And when Jesus talks about fire, and about his baptism,  
and about division and conflict,  
he is talking about what it looks like and what it feels like  
to struggle to live this way—to be faithful to the vision.

Remember the Gospel story earlier this summer  
where James and John get mad at a village in Samaria  
and want to wipe it out by calling down fire from heaven?  
At that time, Jesus said “No.”  
Now today, the very next time fire is talked about in Luke, Jesus says “Yes.”  
But this time, the fire of God’s presence is  
not aimed at the bad guys out there, punishing them.  
Instead, the first one to feel that fire is Jesus himself.  
That’s the way it works.  
The fire that Jesus casts upon the earth is the fire that he first embraces.

This is the fire of transformation and faithfulness;  
the fire that comes, not to destroy, but to refine and purify.  
And God’s first call is always to God’s own.

God’s first call for holiness and righteous is not made to an evil world out there—  
telling it to shape up.  
God’s first call for holiness and righteous is made to us,  
to those who claim to follow Jesus.  
It is **after** we hear and struggle with this call  
that we will have something to say  
and (much more importantly) something to show,  
to a world that definitely needs to clean up its act.

“Every Christian who is not a hero is a pig.”  
There’s enough truth in that quote to make it disturbing.

Now, it’s important that we keep clear about something here.

God does not give us this vision of how human beings should live so that God can sit up there with a checklist keeping score on how we do and gleefully sending us to hell if we get too many wrong answers. And none of these warnings about behavior and discipline have to do with whether or not God will continue to love us. God's unconditional love for creation is a given, that is never at issue. Instead, there are at least two other reasons why God tells us these things about how our lives should look.

The first reason is that because God loves us, God wants for us the fullest and the richest and the deepest life we can have. We are created in such a way that life is available to us most fully when we try to live God's vision of what it means to be a human being. It's a little bit like the old simile that points out that cars are made to run on a certain kind of fuel. There are other sorts of fuel you can put in them that will work for a little while, and that can make for a very interesting ride, for a little while. But then it doesn't work any more. And it will wreck the car. So it is with God's vision for our lives. We just run better, for the long haul, when that is what we are using. We are made that way.

Now, living as we are called to live is not as easy as putting gas into the tank. It is sometimes very hard; and there are a lot of options out there. At the same time, the way we are created to live is not always the way the world around us says we should live. The values are often decidedly different. And if we choose to hold to the values and the vision of our faith, then we will know very well what Jesus means when he talks about division, and conflict, and fire. Nonetheless, in that direction lies life, at its fullest, and its most abundant. God loves us, and God wants that life for us, and God has made us for that life. That is one of the reasons God gives us this vision of how human beings should live—for our own sake.

The other reason has to do with our mission, with our calling to be the body of Christ, to carry out the work and the ministry of Jesus Christ in this place, and in our generation. Part of our witness to the world is offering a hands-on example of a different way to live. Jesus did that. The way Jesus lived forced a choice upon everyone who met him. Remember, Jesus didn't grab anyone by the throat and say,

“You’re a jerk—and if you don’t get fixed you’re in deep trouble.”  
Instead, he offered them himself; he spoke of relationship with God;  
he told the truth; he lived with absolute integrity.  
People saw in Jesus something that caused a crisis in them—  
and they had to choose.

And for the world to see Jesus today, it must look at us.  
It does no good for us, or for the Church, to sit on the sidelines  
and shout to the world out there that it is “bad, bad, bad.”  
Even, indeed especially, when it really is bad, bad, bad.  
Nor does it do much good to tell “them”—the folks out there—  
exactly what they should do to clean up their act.  
Even if, indeed especially if, we know.  
Instead, we are called, as was Jesus himself, to transform ourselves;  
and to show and to tell the world what it looks like,  
and how it is different, to live as we are created to live,  
by a God who loves us, and wants for us the best that can be.

That is what is behind all of these tough lessons.  
It is the call to that wholeness and completeness and new life  
that living as we are created to live can bring.  
And it is the call to share, not good advice, but new lives,  
with a world that is dying for the lack of exactly that.  
It is a challenge, and it is hard.  
But it is the way of life, and the way of hope.