



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Twelfth Sunday After Trinity, August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2007

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. AMEN** ✠

There is something particularly jarring about the collect appointed for today, the 12th Sunday after Trinity. The idea that God is more willing to listen than we to pray is probably okay – borderline, but okay. But the idea that we don't deserve what he gives us sticks in the craw. We are the good guys, after all. If we don't deserve it, who does?

This, of course, explains why churches – the mainline churches – have re-written their liturgies. It's not that the words are old fashioned. Heaven's name! They aren't Philistines. They're civilized people. They love beautiful language, ancient and modern: Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, John Donne, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, Laurence Ferlinghetti . . . It simply that it's nice to have modern language for a change – like easy listening on the radio.

Actually, they dislike the traditional liturgies is not for the language in which they are written but for the thoughts and concepts they express. Take the confessions, for instance – all the palaver about "acknowledging and bewailing our manifold sins and wickedness" and the assertion that "there is no health in us."

The breast-beating and hand wringing in the "Prayer of Humble Access" is even more troubling. The notion that "we are unworthy to gather up the crumbs" under God's table is sheer hyperbole, they say. The situation really isn't so dire. How can God take such spineless whining seriously?

Words deliberately calculated to evoke feelings of extreme humiliation run quite contrary to the spirit of our age. Thus it shouldn't be altogether surprising most of our churches have abandoned traditional liturgies in favor of plain-spoken modern liturgies that – even if less eloquent – speak more directly to modern hearts.

Nor should it be entirely surprising that churches are putting counseling in place of confession, consciousness-raising in place of prayer; and social activism in place of Scripture? The emphasis these days is on "living the faith," not learning it.

But this begs the question: How can you live a faith that you haven't learned? How can you be a Christian if you have no clear idea of what its founder Jesus Christ teaches. Sadly, an awful lot of folks who imagine themselves to be Christian have only the sketchiest knowledge about the faith they supposedly profess.

This puts these folks in a very dangerous situation. For starters, if Jesus is to be taken at his word he is the "Word Made Flesh, the Son of the Living God, the Lord God Incarnate." Jesus is not merely a decent sort of chap, who lived a long time ago and went around helping people. He is the chap who is actually responsible for all this. He is the creator of heaven and earth and all that therein is.

Many churchgoers today seem to think the worst sin they can possibly commit is being "judgmental." "Judgmentalism" is usually portrayed as bigotry: a mindless prejudice against people of different races, different religions, different sexes, different interests, different lifestyles, different habits.

But being "judgmental" isn't at all the same thing as being bigoted. There is such a thing as perfectly wholesome prejudice. It is, for example, not at all unreasonable to be "judgmental" about dangerous, destructive and anti-social behavior.

The idea that "judgmentalism" is, of itself, a sin is entirely false. Jesus is nothing if not judgmental about sin. Mindless bigotry is certainly sinful. So are things such as

deceitfulness, gluttony, promiscuity, envy and pride. >From a Christian perspective, mindless tolerance is just as sinful as mindless intolerance.

These days many churchgoers are entirely ignorant of the Christian virtues. Many seem to think of pride as a virtue; perhaps the greatest virtue of all. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The great sin isn't fornication – natural or unnatural. It isn't avarice, gluttony or sloth. Nor is it murder.

The great sin, the cardinal sin, is pride or self-conceit. It sounds weird to modern ears. After all, everyone's supposed to have a sense of pride – black pride, gay pride, you name it – self esteem is what it's all about.

Yet consider the appalling havoc pride has wrought on mankind – the effects of the hatred and violence it engenders – then imagine the effects pride is likely to have on Christians who fail to recognize it for what it is. Pride was the cause of the fall of Lucifer – the brightest of all the angels . . . a being so proud of his brightness, he persuaded himself to believe that he could be equal to, or even superior to, God, himself. Lucifer is the embodiment of evil, and it is pride that caused him to be so.

The sin of pride is the Original Sin. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden for thinking they could God's job better than He can. They wanted to be "as Gods" – his equals. That's real pride.

And pride led the children of Israel astray at the very outset – in the wilderness and after their arrival in the Promised Land. They reverted to paganism because they thought themselves much too sophisticated for the old stories about God and his laws – and they ended up sacrificing their own children to Moloch.

They ignored prophets, like Isaiah, who urged them to trust in God to save them. Instead, they decided to rely on their own diplomatic skills and military prowess. In other words, they decided, they knew better than God. It ended in total defeat and exile. That's a high price to pay for pride. Pride is nothing but trouble.

The great Christian virtue is the complete antithesis of pride: humility – the virtue embodied in today's collect. Humility requires us to ignore self – the ego folks pay so much to their shrinks to shore up. This self negation is utterly alien to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century mind yet it lies at the very core of Christ's teaching.

Humility is the cardinal virtue from which all others spring. Without humility, there can be no charity – for charity requires us to put the needs of others ahead of our own needs. Without humility, there can be no true love. For real loving means both giving and receiving. It takes humility to receive love.

Without humility, there can be no peacemaking, for peacemakers have to swallow their pride. It takes humility to understand that there are two sides to every story; that our enemy might well have a cause for enmity. Above all, without humility, we cannot hope for God's Grace: For without humility we cannot recognize the sins that we need so desperately to repent.

Humility, you see, isn't craven servility. Humility is understanding and accepting who you are and where you stand in God's scheme of thing. Sounds easy enough but human beings have been getting it wrong since the days of Adam and Eve.

*AMEN*

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***