

SERMON – THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 22 JULY 2018

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

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Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Romans 8: 12

Matt. 7: 15

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

We are gathered today to participate in an event that stretches our imaginations and links us to the great mystery of God's love and desire to find a way into human lives—even the lives of small, joyful children. It is striking to think that the God who brought all creation into being through the expansiveness of space-time, whose reaches we are still uncovering, desires to be with and in us! A simple photo from the Hubble deep space array overpowers our finite knowing. Yet in the mysteries the Divine life is at work laying claim to all, even us.

One of the greatest mysteries in life, other than the mystery we call God, is our own existence. What is it that makes you who you are? Think for a moment about all the things or traits which we use to describe ourselves and that we cling to because we believe they define us; are we still the person we wish think we are if one by one those are removed from sight? Most of us could go into the home of another person here and after a while we would likely see family portraits or albums of pictures. If we really want to bore folks we can even pull out several of those that span some years and start looking at them and spinning yarns about what life was like “back then”. Our friends might see us as we were 20, 30, or 40 years ago, and perhaps 50 less pounds ago! Our hair, if we still have it, will have been altered in its tint save that which comes from a bottle. There are few things more sobering than to realize how much change time has brought; to see ourselves then and now! Which of those is the “real” us? Is it one or the other or perhaps both? What losses and gains have become part of our experience, and how do those play into the ways we live now? And what are we to make of the deeds and failures of which we are rightly ashamed? In short, what is the foundation and source of this person we all call “me”? What is the lasting photograph?

In the Epistle from Romans St. Paul tells his hearers, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption, by which we cry, Abba, Father”. This is Paul's answer, his photography in response to our questions!! In the face of conflicting demands and confusion about the core of life, he says you can get rid of the blurred snapshots by recognizing this relationship God has put in place.

But realize that Paul is saying all of this within a context that he has been addressing over several earlier chapters. If you have ever stepped into a room in the middle of a conversation that is at its halfway point, you know how easy it is to mishear the full meaning of the dialogue. Imagine coming home and finding your spouse or child talking with a visitor. The visitor says rather tersely, “Well, I will tell you this much. I cannot believe that decision. It is one of the most foolish things I have ever heard”. You might well get your hackles up and start to come to the defense of your family member, only to be embarrassed to discover that the visitor is referring to another mutual acquaintance and not your family. That is where we are with Romans. Paul's images are in response to what has come earlier. He has spoken of doing what he full well knows is wrong and of not doing what he equally knows is right. He has painted a picture of what it means to be in bondage to sin and fear all of which derives from one thing—human nature's attempt to be totally self-sufficient and to define ourselves without reference to God. This is what he means about living according to the flesh—the opposite of trust in one into whom we have been baptized. It is creating a family portrait, but with one essential person missing—Christ. It is forgetting that we are in the image of God and not the world around us. Quite simply the result is death—which is the absence of hope, the lack of forgiveness, so that we are thrown back on ourselves for salvation. Christians have been set free from that bondage. Because we have been given the Spirit in baptism we are no longer obligated to conform our lives or our self-images to those the world or anxiety place before us. We are the Father's own.

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I recall some 35 years ago watching my father baptize our daughter. I was struck at time by several things. She was wearing the baptismal outfit of her great grandmother. Of course it is only clothing. But it symbolized a potent fact, namely, that she was part of an ongoing family with all the deficits and strengths that brings with it, and that she would remain a member of that family through thick and thin. She belonged and through that family she would come to know at least in part, something of who she is. The second thing is that on that day and in that Sacrament she was being put up for adoption into another family whose Father would share none of the shortcomings of her biological one. There is freedom in that truth and identity for an entire life.

Who are we really with all the mysteries we present to ourselves and others, and all the challenges life puts in our paths? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian was arrested by the Nazis during WWII, tried and sent to Flossenberg prison to await execution due to his participation in the attempted assassination of Hitler. Shortly before his death he wrote the following prose which was saved by the guards who were dramatically impacted by his conduct and faith:

“Who am I? They often tell me I stepped from my cell’s confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly like a squire from his country-house. Who am I? They often tell me I used to speak to my warders freely and clearly, as though it were mine to command. Who am I? They also tell me I bore the days of misfortune equally, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to winning. Am I then really all that which other men tell of? Or am I only what I myself know of myself?—Restless and longing, and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath? Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds...thirsting for words of kindness and neighborliness; weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making, Faint and ready to say farewell to it all. Who am I? This or the other? Am I one person today and tomorrow another, or am I both at once?...Who am I? They mock me these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I AM THINE!! It is not the perplexities that define us, but the fact that we are adopted; we are God’s own. Amen+