Proper 12 All Saints Church

July 28, 2019 Year C

Genesis 18:20-32 Colossians 2:6-15 [16-19]

Psalm 138 Luke 11:1-13

Dear Lord, please increase our strength within us. AMEN

After the Lord’s prayer, our gospel writer Luke shares with us one of Jesus’ parables.

The story involves the actions of three friends: one arrives at midnight; the second has no bread to place before his guest; the third is roused in the middle of the night by the second friend and asked to provide bread so he can be hospitable to the first.

Jesus goes on to say that it’s NOT about conventions of friendship that will get the third man out of bed. He won’t get out of bed because of his friendship, but rather because of his friend’s persistence.

I actually don’t see much persistence here. Other parables come to mind: the woman who harangues the corrupt judge to bring about justice; the Syro-Phonecian woman who begs Jesus for healing for her daughter; the woman who just touches the fringe of Jesus cloak and stays to be exposed.

These folks keep up with their persistence, insisting and asserting. This man knocks once. And there have been other stories of knocking. In another story, one friend has made such a pest of himself by knocking repeatedly at his neighbor’s door, the sleepy guy obliges in order to shut his friend up and go back to sleep- now that’s persistence.

But this man knocks once. The Greek word here is *anaideia*, which can be translated as persistence, but a more literal translation is shamelessness. This makes more sense. It’s like the shamelessness of Abraham who keeps coming back to the Lord, bargaining with him… how much can Abraham get from the God Almighty. Go Abraham!!

I am reminded of a time when I was at Church of the Heavenly Rest, as an Associate Priest. I was the priest in charge of the pageant, along with the Choir Director/Organist who really ran the show. On Christmas Eve, we had 2 services (folks referred to them as “shows”). They had a point… we had real sheep, goats, and a donkey, solos for Joseph, Mary and the Three Kings. 1,000 people came for each service- it was a big deal.

The solos presented a problem. We needed good singers- not every child in the parish was a good singer. So, the Rector, wanting a beautiful “show,” opened up the pageant to auditions. These became huge- children came with resumes… no kidding!

There was a huge rift starting up in the church: “Our own children are being relegated to the dressing room while strangers are taking over the pageant.”

“This is good for the church,” other parishioners insisted, “it’s opening up our doors to strangers- isn’t this what evangelism is about? Two thousand people arrive at our doors because the pageant is beautiful.”

Nobody asked my opinion, but I agreed with those who were worried about our own children. Didn’t the pageant belong to them, and couldn’t this be evangelism at its worse? Yes, 2,000 people came, only to come again next Christmas, along with their families and friends because their child was one of the stars. They had even stolen the show from Jesus.

Kind of shameless.

But after one late evening phone call, I changed my mind.

I’ll get to that, but first let me set the stage. There was a woman who came with her three children every Christmas. Her children could sing- incredible voices! Amazing.

This woman was gracious, and incredibly helpful. She ran out for food, tied kids’ shoes, helped blow their noses, arranged rides, helped with the blocking, and the list goes on.

She often referred to herself as someone with “all her ducks in a row.” It was strange, kind of a derogatory thing to say about yourself…. Yet, everything did seem perfectly aligned…. Wealthy husband; she was beautiful and stylish, and maybe it bothered me because with a 4 year-old and a newborn at home, I knew my “ducks were ***not*** in a row.”

Yet her constant reference to herself in that way reminded me of guns and target practice.

One night, at 2:00 am, my phone rang, jarring me out of sleep. I answered, worried.

“I’m here again.” No greeting, but I recognized her voice immediately.

“Where are you?”

“At a bar in the lower east side.”

“Where are your children?”

“They’re fine, at home with the nanny. My husband is out of town. I keep coming back here to this bar when I have a chance. The men are so captivating, so alive, so funny…. They’re part of the Mafia- I’m so intrigued.”

With that, I sat up and began to walk down the hall. I had lived in Sicily. The Mafia was not just a B-rate movie, but very real, very scary, very powerful. And very seductive!!

“What do they want from you?”

“I don’t know’ they’ve all gone back to some room, talking among themselves, and for the first time I’m really scared. You were the only one I could think of to call.”

Shamelessly.

And I shamelessly answered: “You have called me for a reason. You want a sign as what to do…. You want to hear the voice of God. I am that voice.”

I really said that!!!! Shameless.

“Do exactly what I am going to tell you to do. Do you have your wallet? (Yes). Do not go back to the table; leave your coat; walk out the back door; get in a cab; and take a long ride; do they know your name? (No). Make sure no one is following you. Once you are convinced no one is following you, go home, make yourself a cup of tea; kiss your kids.”

Click…. She hung up.

Needless to say, I did not sleep, and not once did I think that she was making any of it up.

The next day, about ten in the morning, she appeared in my church office, appearing as she always did…. With her ducks in a row, perfectly poised.

She walked in. I said nothing. I was kind of speechless. She said, “You might have saved my life last night.” I nodded maybe, but I thought it was really the Christ dwelling within her that had saved her. “I just want to come to say good-bye. I’m making some changes. Thank you for taking me seriously.”

And with that she walked out. I followed the sound of her footsteps and went to my office window that looked out onto Central Park and 5th Avenue. I watched her cross the street, and I opened my window.

At the Park, she turned and looked up. We held each other in our gaze for quite a long time. And then she raised her hand, and I raised mine. She turned around and disappeared in the park.

I never saw her again. I asked around and heard that she had moved away, was getting a divorce. I trusted that she was in good hands.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, “When Christ calls someone, he bids that one comes and dies.”

This woman knew death- I shudder to think of all that she risked in order to feel alive again in that bar. She had been screaming it at me by always referring to herself as “all my ducks in a row.” All I know is that she trusted me enough to shamelessly call out in the middle of the night.

She was also shameless as she stood at the corner of the park and held me with her eyes, and saluted me of sorts…. She held me in dignity as she held herself. She was choosing to die to “her ducks all in a row life,” the only life she knew, and I was her witness.

The spiritual writer John Donohue speaks about the death of winter and the birth of spring…. That spring just doesn’t appear after a shrug from winter. No… it appears because during the bleakness of winter, spring is being prepared. Spring needs the death of winter and the winter womb to come alive.

This is what Paul means when he says we are rooted in Christ. How that happens, who knows. Maybe it comes through a Christmas pageant which appears to be only a show. All I know is that no one can steal the show from Jesus.

And no one can stop Jesus from doing what Jesus does. Please allow me to turn the parable around a bit, to suggests that Jesus may be the one coming and knocking at our door in the middle of the night!

The Christ is rooted within all of us and speaks. Sometimes it appears shamelessly…. Jesus exhorts us to ask shamelessly for a life that emerges from the dead… because guess what?!! Jesus also shamelessly loves us and knows that life is always there within us, always present, even if it means we may have to die and lose a life we think we own.

Ask, seek, knock and the life of Christ indwelling within, with all its fullness, will be given to you…. AMEN