

SERMON

The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
February 17, 2019

Luke 5: 17-26



And the gates of hell shall not prevail! This is the inscription on my favorite icon. Or sometimes it's called, "The Descent into Hell." 'Icon' or *Iconography* refers to the making and liturgical use of icons, pictorial representations of Biblical scenes from the life of Christ, historical events in the life of the Church, and portraits of the saints. Icons are usually two-dimensional images, made of paint, mosaic, embroidery, weaving, carving, or engraving, And a person who practices the art of iconography is called an iconographer. It is said that from the first centuries of Christianity, icons have been used for prayer. The most literal translation from the Greek is "image writing," insisting that icons are not "painted" but rather "written." Icons, like scripture, are not just artistic compositions but are witnesses to the truth the way Scripture is. They are to be understood like scribal copies of the Bible. The Sunday of Orthodoxy is celebrated on the first Sunday of Lent or "The Great Fast" as it is sometimes called. On The Sunday of Orthodoxy, the Orthodox celebrate the reestablishment of the veneration of icons—the prayerful, liturgical use of icons. It is one of the most distinctive elements of the Byzantine Rite.

So I went looking for an icon about today's gospel—best known as the Sermon on the Mount—though today's version is from Luke not Matthew and happens in the Plain, or a flat place, not on a mount or the hills of Galilee. It is different in other respects as well. Turns out there seems to be hardly any representations of the Sermon on the Mount or on the Plains—which is surprising, since this scene contains some of the most famous words of Christ, and the central tenets of His teaching. There is only one mosaic found in Ravenna, Italy from the 6th century, and one "written" sometime in the last 50 years. Jesus sits among his disciples, who look like a gathering of students anywhere, a bit sleepy, if you know what I mean. It doesn't depict the power of this moment very well, which is why I prefer the icon "And the Gates of Hell shall not prevail!" That's an attention-getter! But we'll come back to that.

Henri Nouwen, that much loved teacher of spirituality—who has written some of the most thoughtful and pastoral works on the meaning and power of prayer—also wrote a book on praying with icons—entitled, “Behold the Beauty.” In it, he wrote about the icon known as Rublev’s Trinity—his favorite. In it, three figures sit around a table. There is a chalice. Behind them an olive tree. And to the left, a house. Nouwen writes:

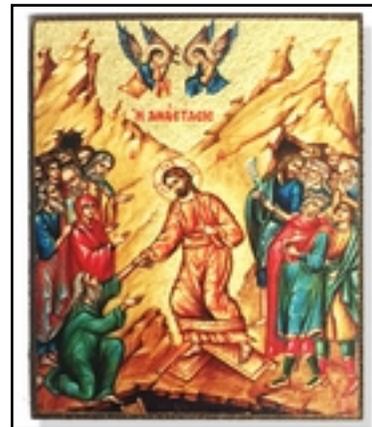
Behind them an olive tree. And to the left, a house. Nouwen writes:

After I gazed for a long time at Rublev's Trinity
these words spoke to me with new power.
“Praying at all times” has come to mean
“dwelling in the **house** of God all the days of our lives.”
“Surviving all that is going to happen”
now tells me that I no longer need to be a victim
of the fear, hatred and violence that rule the world.

“Standing with confidence before the Son of Man”
no longer just refers to the end of time,
but opens for me the possibility of living confidently,
that is, with trust (the literal meaning of con-fide)
in the midst of hostility and violence.

I pray that Rublev's icon will teach many
how to live in the midst of a fearful,
hateful and violent world
while moving always deeper into the house of love.

When I gaze upon the scripture today, from the Gospel of Luke, I see a lot more than just a teacher sitting in the midst of his students. It is a display of immeasurable power. This is why it brings to mind the icon known as “And the gates of Hell shall not prevail!” In this icon, Jesus stands upon broken shutters, gates, doors that have been thrown down and make a sort of cross. There are crowds of woeful people on either side. He is bent over, leaning down with his arms reaching out pulling two people—a man and a woman—up, lifting them up, out of the blackness of hell. The descent into hell on behalf of humankind! To raise us all from the vicissitudes and damages of life. He descends.... to lift us up—all of us! It reveals a



power that is only possible for a God of creation and redemption! A God whose power is focused on salvation.

Ever wonder why in the creed it says, “He died and was buried. He descended into Hell. And on the third day he rose.” What was he doing in those three days? Don’t be literal—gaze upon the scriptures! Pray the scriptures! He descended to Hell, and on the third day, he rose! He reaches into Hell to include the living and the dead—that all may rise! It is an explosion of power and rebirth! Of compassion and love.

Have you ever felt...’I’ll be damned if I keep my mouth shut in the face of injustice!” “I’ll be damned if I let that child suffer like that!” “I’ll be damned, if I’m going to stand by and do nothing!” This is the sort of explosion that happens in us when love and compassion take over. When we become sensitized and awake to the harsh realities that face our neighbors and ourselves. This is the place where vocations and passions become real. Jesus says to his followers:

*Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength
to survive all that is going to happen,
and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.*

“I’ll be damned if I don’t do something about that!” When outrage meets compassion, the love of God is near and the Holy Spirit is moving. It is Jesus, pulling us from the jaws of death. *Even the gates of hell shall not prevail!* That’s power. Released into the world! Through us. In spite of ourselves!

Let’s take a quick look at the word power. It is the ability to act or produce an effect. (For you baseball fans—It’s the ability to get extra-base hits!) Sometimes it refers to legal or official authority, capacity, or right—possession of control, authority, or influence over others. It is different from the word “force.” Force is external. Physical might. Power comes from within. Or somehow through us. Force is like a bomb or a tank, or a gun. Power is what creates, enlivens, and overcomes. Moral efficacy. Compassion. Love. I’d place my bet on power not force for final

results. Nuclear physicists will tell you, there is more power—shear power— in a square inch of silently growing grass than in any atomic bomb.

With or without the help of an icon, let's take another look at today's gospel lesson. This is not about some sleepy classroom!

*They had come to hear Jesus and to be healed of their diseases;
and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.
And all in the crowd were trying to touch him,
for power came out from him and healed all of them.*

For power came out from him and healed all of them. These were people familiar with might — the force—*of the Roman law of swords and tanks and the decimation of their life and culture.* They came to Jesus for something else. For healing. For being lifted up and revived. For compassion and love. For life, not death. And he said to them:

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.
“Blessed are you when people hate you,
and when they exclude you, revile you,
and defame you on account of the Son of Man.
Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,
for surely your reward is great in heaven;
for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

And woe to your enemies. These were not people within their own communities who they liked or didn't like. These were serious enemies—those who condemned them to death with the force of war and oppression—the occupiers of their land who were awaiting orders to destroy them. What do you say to people who are genuinely facing death? Maybe you don't say too much. Maybe you reach down and pull them up. Maybe you go to them and stay with them awhile.

Maybe you pray for them. Maybe you invite them to your dinner table and listen. Maybe you cry and weep with them. Maybe you take on their burden for awhile. Maybe you become their advocate. Maybe you say, “I’ll be damned if I can stand by and watch and do nothing!” Maybe a sort of explosion happens in us when love and compassion take over. Maybe some healing takes place. Woe to those who get in our way!

[Baptism Sunday] Little Ryan William, maybe you and your parents —and all of us—aren’t aware of all that you are receiving today. It’s a lot. It’s powerful. In baptism, you are receiving nothing less than the love and power of God in Christ—God who created you and sustains you. And, who will go to any length to be with you all the days of your life.

Join us. Join us at the Table. Dwell in the House of God. Pray without ceasing. Standing with confidence.

Learn with us. Learn from the teaching of Jesus. Receive the healing, reviving power of God.

Reach with us. Reach into the world to raise others to life, in the name of Christ.

Amen.