

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2015

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You won't find today's gospel on anyone's list of bedtime Bible stories for children! Having a great millstone put around your neck and being cast into the sea is not a recipe for sweet dreams! Add to that the description of the Jerusalem garbage dump. *Gehenna* was where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." Not for children, unless your name is Edgar Allan Poe!

But this *is* the teaching of Our Lord Jesus, who gives graphic descriptions of where transgressors are headed in a strictly moral universe. And it *is* a strictly moral universe! Both the Old Testament and the Son of God attest those in a sinful condition cannot approach the holiness of God. The scriptures from stem to stern give us a specific and *remarkably unchangeable* list of transgressions. The most famous list is of course The Ten Commandments, but includes the need for careful preparation for worship, and, above all, in our social relations with our fellow man. "Cut off your hand; pluck out your eye, sounds ghastly! But as a way of renouncing the evil you have done and preventing a recurrence, this is a logical step, and it is consistent with the warnings in both Old and New Testaments.

But in this *same gospel passage* we have another remarkable teaching of Christ. This is His response to a complaint by His disciples. Some fellow was using Christ's Name without formally being a part of the Lord's fellowship. (This was a problem in the early Church as well.) What should be the Church's attitude to non-Christian exorcists who made use of the Holy Name of Jesus? Given Our Lord's severe teaching noted above, can't you just see James and John rubbing their hands in delight? The Lord didn't nickname them *Boanerges*, "Sons of Thunder", for nothing. They had called for fire and brimstone on those who opposed their Master. So it stops the show when Jesus says there are kind people who help others out of common humanity even though they are not professed Christians. The Lord says these people will experience God's mercy at the judgment.

What is going on here? James and John aren't the only ones who want to know! Do we have two incompatible views of the order of things? One is the strict standard of a totally just universe. And the other is pervaded by the generous and tolerant soul of Jesus Christ. It is rather that *all* the rules of creation emanate from Almighty God. But they manifest differently in different souls. The universe can

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characterize itself as impersonal to those who believe it to be so. And the Lord warns that in that case we must be absolutely obedient to its laws. But there is also a domain of *personal relationship* where we enter the family of God by adoption and grace. Here we strive, motivated by loving obedience, not law, to holiness, and in which we avail of family attributes we call sorrow, contrition, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

An old friend of mine back in my Michigan days grew up in the north woods and later moved to the big city. He went home regularly and would sit in the local coffee shop and chew the fat with the farmers. In the fall hunting season great numbers of city folks headed into northern Michigan for a few days or a week. Some of these hunters didn't know one end of a shotgun from the other! And even though they could read their ticket stubs and find their seats in places like Symphony Hall, during hunting season they were unable to read signs that said NO TRESPASSING. Farmers got a bit annoyed. They even had to paint C.O.W. in big letters on the sides of their livestock! The landowners would just as soon shoot a careless sportsman as look at one.

But my friend could hunt and fish where he liked, and without permission. And if he got careless he might get yelled at. But it was never "Get out of here and don't come back." Rather "Be more careful." Two hunters trespassing through the same fields could have very different experiences. And what made the difference was that although both were legally trespassing, my friend had *a relationship with the people* of his hometown area. He might be as careless about property rights as the other hunters from the city. But the locals knew him.

Our Lord Jesus says, "If you are willing to be in a relationship with Me, the terms of salvation are exceptionally generous." How generous? To the point of saying, "No one who performs a mighty deed in My Name can at the same time speak ill of Me." It is a reminder that God gives us Catholics sacraments for our sake. But He is not limited by them. He gives us apostolic ministry to serve in His Name. He honors that, but again He is not bound by that. He gives us judgment, and we are *all* bound by that. But Almighty God doesn't wear two hats. There are no divine

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mood swings. The Creator doesn't take *Ritalin!* *His mercy is part of His judgment,* and His will is to save us all from our foolishness.

In this seemingly contradictory gospel we find a recipe. "Gouge out your eye; cut off your hand" if that will get you closer to the Kingdom of Heaven. But if you cannot manage that, then giving a cup of cold water to someone in need is a good place to start. It won't end there, of course. Christ's love is too powerful and too potent for that. Our small initial gestures give way to a very different perspective, and in time we will want to give to, and not just take from, the Lord Jesus. And then He will have us as His own.