

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 30, 2018

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We visited the MFA last week to see the *Winnie-the-Pooh* exhibit. It brought back memories of my maternal grandmother reading these stories to me at bedtime. She would be in tears of laughter while I was wondering what was so funny. Well, today's gospel passage is not likely to be on anyone's list of bedtime Bible stories for children! Weighted down with stones and being thrown into the sea, and the description of *Gehenna*, the great Jerusalem garbage dump full of worms and fire, might appeal to Edgar Allen Poe or Vlad the Impaler. The first part of today's gospel is a long way from Winnie and Piglet tracking the Woozle in the snow!

But the gospel *is* the teaching of Our Lord Jesus. These are graphic descriptions of where transgressors are headed in a strictly moral universe. And it *is* a strictly moral universe! Both the Old Testament witness and the teaching of the Son of God attest that those in a sinful condition cannot approach the holiness of God. All through the Scriptures we are given a specific, and *remarkably unchangeable*, list of transgressions. There are indications of Divine morality even prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments. And the Ten Commandments are not ten suggestions! "Cut off your hand; pluck out your eye" would make a ghastly bedtime story for children. But as a way of renouncing the evil you have done and preventing you from doing more, it is a logical step on the way to eternal life.

But then: FULL STOP! This stern teaching of Our Lord is followed by His very different response to a complaint from the disciples. Their complaint was some fellow was using Christ's Name without being a card-carrying member of the Lord's fellowship. (No doubt this was a problem in the early Church as well. What should be the Church's attitude towards non-Christians who made use of the Name of Jesus?) In light of the severe teaching just heard from the Lord, no doubt James and John, nicknamed *Sons of Thunder*, rubbed their hands in delight. "Let'em have it, Lord." But the Son of God gave another Divine show stopper. There are kind people who help others out of common humanity even though they are not professed Christians. Jesus says they will experience God's mercy at the judgment.

So what is going on here? Are there *two* incompatible views of the order of things? Is there one of strict standards in a totally just universe and another, presided over by the generous and tolerant soul of Christ? It is rather that *all* the rules of creation

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emanate from Almighty God but manifest themselves differently in different people as each is able to receive. The universe can characterize itself as impersonal to those who believe it so. This is not license for free will run amok! Our Lord warns that those who adhere to that view must be absolutely obedient to its laws. But there is also a domain of *personal relationship*. This is when we enter into the family of God by adoption and grace. In this relationship we are motivated to holiness by love, and avail ourselves of family attributes called sorrow, contrition, confession, amendment, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Spending time in the north woods you see many signs reading *No Hunting* and *No Trespassing*. A friend back in Kalamazoo grew up in northern Michigan but moved to the city for work. He would go home regularly and chew the fat with the locals in the coffee shop. In the fall each year great numbers of city folks would head to the north woods to hunt. Some of them didn't know one end of a shotgun from the other! They didn't know a Jersey cow from a ten-point buck! Farmers got a bit annoyed. They had to paint COW in big letters on the sides of their livestock. There were plenty of landowners who would just as soon shoot a careless sportsman as look at one.

But my friend could hunt and fish wherever he liked and without permission. If he was careless he might get yelled at. But it was never "Get out of here." Rather it was "Be careful." Two hunters trespassing through the same field could have very different experiences. And the difference was that although both were trespassing, my friend had a relationship with the people of his hometown area. He might be as careless about property rights as the other city boys. 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 His saying "No one who performs a mighty deed in My Name can at the same time speak ill of Me." This is a reminder God gives Catholics. We are nourished by the Sacraments. He blesses our apostolic order and evangelism. But He also says "Other sheep have I; them also I must bring into My fold." The Lord gives judgment, and *all* are bound by that. But His mercy is part of His judgment, and His will is to save us all from our foolishness. In all the Scriptures it is revealed

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God has no desire for the death of any one but that he turn from his sin and be saved.

So here in this seemingly contradictory gospel passage is 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 someone a cup of cold water 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, and not just take, from the Lord Jesus. And then He will have us as His Own.