

Year A, Proper 17
Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 105:1-6,23-26,45C
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

The Rev. Chris Fair Beebe
St. Francis Episcopal Church
Rutherfordton, NC
September 3, 2017

Take my lips, O Lord, and speak through them; Take our minds and think through them; Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for You, Lord Christ. Amen.

Today Alexandra Jacqueline Hill will be baptized into the body of Christ at St. Francis. Lexie is the great-granddaughter of the late T. C. Bailey, and granddaughter of Bailey's daughter, the late Debbie Bailey Hill Hollifield. She's the third child in her generation to be baptized here, and she and her cousins represent the fourth generation of their family to have their baptisms recorded in our Parish Register, making them baptized members of our church. St. Francis has played an important part in their family life, in baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals. We live in a society where fewer and fewer families remain in one place or see "place" as a uniting factor in their lives. At the same time, unfortunately, the church has lost some of its cultural prominence as a moral and ethical icon. For all of these reasons and more, days like today are not only special, but important; a time for celebration but also an occasion of great responsibility for the church as we consider what we want to teach our children and how we, as the church and its members are called to be living examples of what we teach, of what Christ has taught us.

Whenever a child is baptized at St. Francis, I remember that wonderful verse from the 22nd chapter of Proverbs. In the King James Version it says, "Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it." Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the bible, *The Message*, states it even more plainly: "Point your kids in the right direction—when they're old they won't be lost." Today's lessons, especially from Paul's Letter to the Romans and Matthew's Gospel are especially teachable. Paul writes to the members of the Christian community in Rome about how they are to live together in community, how they are to treat each other—and also how they are to treat their neighbors *and* their enemies. In Matthew's Gospel we see Jesus transition from an itinerant teacher and healer, into the role of the Messiah, sent by God and ready to fulfill his divine purpose. Although I understand why the Gospel is the last of the scriptures we hear in worship, sometimes I think it would be helpful to put the lessons in their chronological order, and this is one of those days. Today's Gospel lesson serves as a lens for us to interpret and truly understand what Paul has written to the early church.

For lack of a better comparison, we might imagine that Jesus' disciples hear him foretell his suffering and death in the same way we would hear the terminal diagnosis of a loved one's illness. They hear what he tells them, but they don't *want* to hear it. If he says it, it is surely true, but no—it cannot be true. Peter's words speak for them all, sounding to us to be words of love and deep sadness, and we have to think that's how Peter meant them. If that is the case, he must have been both surprised and hurt when Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Yes, that's right! Peter is a human being, and we are human beings, too. It's difficult for us to comprehend this on a divine level because we are not divine.

Peter had to trust that Jesus knew what he was talking about, and so do we. That's the basis of our faith, and through our faith we believe that in time we *will* understand, just as in time the disciples understood. Until then, our own purpose is to believe and to live by the principles Jesus teaches, principles Paul explains in his letters to communities that were formed in the shadow of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension. Perhaps it was easier for them to "get it" than it is for folks in our day. Paul's words remind us that a faith community exists in relation to its culture and to the world around it. The Christian church in Rome was influenced by and then responded to its Roman context, just as we are influenced by and respond to life in our own time. The challenge for Christians then and now is to avoid the temptation of conformity. Jesus called us to be in the world, but not of the world. Surely you'll agree that we don't always succeed.

In William Barclay's commentary on the Letter to the Romans, he calls today's passage "The Christian Life in Everyday Action," and writes that they are "ten telegraphic rules for ordinary, everyday life." The beauty of Paul's words is that they are as timeless as they are concise, equally instructive to us as to his first readers, and we really do not need a commentary to understand them. Yet following them isn't always easy. We find ourselves resisting, in the same way that Jesus' disciples likely resisted his call for them to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. Following Christ is not always easy, because it demands us to act against both our human nature and the prevailing culture—both in the way we interact with each other and in our recognition and rejection of evil. Our culture is decidedly individualistic and evil often takes refuge in our "me first" mentality. We must be diligent and Christ-centered if we are to resist evil, love one another with mutual affection, and leave the outcome of our concerns to God. As hard as that can be, it's the only way to find God's peace which passes all understanding. And although we may not want to admit it, living with love and seeking what is good and positive and uplifting will surely make us happier than we can ever be when we seek the control and conformity of the world, which so often leads to criticism, complaint, and condemnation. The way we act, speak, and think is a choice we make. As a wise man once wrote, "Speak, move, act in peace, as if you were in prayer. In truth, this *is* prayer."

A traditional story retold in Margaret Silf's book *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World* is about a mother who loved her two daughters very much. It saddened her that they never got along with each other, and when they eventually became totally estranged from each other—with no contact at all—she agonized about how she might bring them back together. Finally, she came up with a plan. She sat down and drafted a letter to them both. In it, she told them over and over again how very much she loved them both, and how she longed for them to love each other in the way she loved them. She shared her grief over their separation and gave them some news of her own life, as well as her advice about how they could live happier and more loving lives themselves.

When she was satisfied that she had written everything she wanted them to know, she wrote out one copy for each daughter. But they were not the same letter. The copy for one daughter contained only the even sentences, and the other daughter's letter contained only the odd sentences. On its own, neither letter made sense, and neither contained the fullness of their mother's message, or of her love for them. When the daughters received their letters they were puzzled—until it dawned on them what had happened. They faced a dilemma. Each of them loved their mother, and they knew that if they really wanted to know what she had written, they would have to put their two letters together and read them as one. That meant they would have to approach one another again, in mutual love and respect.

The mother waited a long time for an answer to her letter. Both of the daughters had questions, and there were complicated efforts by each of them to make sense of the half-letter they possessed. And there were recriminations, with accusations made and blame laid by each of them. Each thought she knew her mother better than her sister ever could. And each believed their mother loved her more than she could ever love her other daughter. There were many differences, many assumptions, many misconceptions to be resolved. One day, when the mother had almost given up hope, there was a knock at the door, and the daughters stood there together. "We've come home," they said in unison. "We've finally put our letters together and we've come to say how much we love you, Mom." And their mother flung her arms around them both, welcoming them home.

God has brought us together, through our Lord Jesus Christ, to be the Church. It is a place for us to shelter from the demands of the world, to put aside our differences, to love and honor Christ in each other, to rejoice in hope, and to live together in harmony. Today we welcome Lexie into the body of Christ here at St. Francis. I pray that she and all others who come here seeking him will find it a place of peace, love, and joy, a place of abundant hospitality, where all are welcome; a place where Christ may always be found. *Amen.*