



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 19, 2017
The Third Sunday in Lent

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels, Ph.D.
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TAKE UP AND READ

The third of five sermons in the Lenten series on Praying with Holy Men and Holy Women.

My assignment today is to share something about Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in North Africa, something about his theology, his prayers, his influence. He was born in AD 354, in what is now Algeria; he died in the year 430. By that time he was already one of the most influential theologians in the Western world, and his influence has not waned in the intervening fifteen hundred years.

There are a number of excellent contemporary biographies of Augustine. There are studies that shed light on his influences; the context in which he did his work; the way his thought developed; the way his thought was developed by others. I commend those books to you. I will leave it to them to fill out the details of his life, and I leave to the cottage industry of historical theologians who study his work the task of explicating its abiding influence on Western Christianity.

I myself am not a biographer, but this afternoon, with your indulgence, I can be an autobiographer. I can tell you a bit about Augustine's influence on me and why, when the opportunity came up to talk about praying with holy men and women, there was never any question as to what figure I would choose.

When I was in my late teens and early 20s, I felt very fortunate, because I was fairly certain that I knew everything, or at least that I knew pretty close to everything. I would not have put it that way, of course. There were plenty of pieces of information that I did not know, though they were things I was confident I could pick up in time. But in its essentials, yes, I'd say that I was doing pretty well in the knowledge department.

One of the things I was pretty sure that I knew about was religion in all its forms. I would say that I had some kind of religious belief system, amorphous and skeptical. I was fairly certain that the people who were really into their religion (particularly into Christianity), such as the worshipers you see on TV or, God forbid, the clergy, we should feel sorry for, because they lacked the courage that I had to ask the really difficult questions about their faith. The less charitable way of putting it would be that they were rubes, blindly following the lessons they had been taught, without either the critical faculties or the courage to do otherwise. It was better, I thought, to maintain a cool distance from all of that, to observe it objectively from afar, and to maintain the independence that the others lacked. "What is Enlightenment?" Immanuel Kant thundered in the eighteenth century. He answered confidently, "Think for yourself!"

Perhaps things would have continued that way forever, except for an accidental, curriculum-required—certainly not chosen—interaction during college with this man, Augustine of Hippo. It began with reading the *Confessions* in the course of studying Western literature; continued in a political philosophy class with the *City of God*; and

then, less conventionally, included *On Christian Doctrine* while studying literary theory, my first love. These were not theology classes. They were secular courses at a secular university taught, as far as I could tell, by secular professors, interested only in the ideas themselves, and only certain ones of those ideas.

Even I could tell that Augustine was, clearly, a very smart man. Equally clearly, he was a man of immense faith. But, just as clearly, he was all of that without being afraid to ask the difficult questions about his religion that I thought only nonbelievers could have the nerve and independence to ask. Questions like: In what way can we say that we are free? What is the relationship between knowledge and faith? What is the relationship between secular philosophy and Christian theology? What are our obligations to other people, and where do those obligations come from? What is God, anyway? What do we even mean when we say “God”? How does all of this fit together with any kind of coherence and integrity?

What shocked me in reading Augustine was not his technical argumentation, exactly, which I frankly did not understand very much of. What shocked me was his engagement with these issues at all, and the way he engaged with them. He engaged with them prayerfully. The *Confessions* itself is one long prayer. To God he addressed the question, Whom do I love when I love my God? To God he asked, What is God? What do we mean? To God he prayed, How does this fit together with coherence and integrity?

You have to understand that I thought those were my questions; as in, they were unique to me and my courageous intellect, along with that of others who shared my diffidence about religious commitment. I thought that they could only be the questions of an independent, post-Enlightenment thinker, having cast off the shackles of religious doctrine and resisting the oppression of orthodoxy—orthodoxy, that curse word, that tyrannical ruler whose real function was to silence dissent, who responded to questions of that kind with charges of heresy and excommunication.

So you can imagine my surprise when, between the ripped covers of a cheap paperback, from a text written before modernity, before the Enlightenment, before even the Middle Ages, written by a bishop of the Church, I found engagement, not evasion. I found serious conversation with and within Christian orthodoxy, not as a prompt for silencing questions, but precisely as invitations to ask them, and keep asking them. I found a vocabulary that facilitated critical thinking, not sought to limit it.

This was not even really a particularly theological discovery on my part. It was more personally significant even than that. It was the opening up of horizons that I did not know existed. It was exposure to this ancient, long-running argument among people who were fully critical and fully faithful. I saw that they were arguing back then; that they are arguing now; that they will be arguing when the clouds part and Jesus returns.

What I found in those faded pages was the startling—even upsetting—discovery, in other words, that I did not, in fact, know everything. It came as a surprise, I’ll be honest, and I’ve never really recovered from the shock of it.

I never became a full-fledged, card-carrying, Augustinian. There are places where our thought diverges, and some parts of his work have aged better than others. Augustine is a guide, not a destination. He did not give me whatever imperfect faith I have; that is a divine gift. And I still find certain religious questions extremely hard, and I am still uncomfortable with this or that, and I still struggle with fitting all of this together with coherence and integrity. I struggle with the prayer that was as natural and free-flowing to Augustine as taking a breath and letting it out, taking it in and letting it out.

But at a certain point in time, the long-dead bishop of Hippo provided me with a model, gifted me with a tradition, and showed me some of the possibilities of a life of faith. For that I will ever be grateful to him, and to the Spirit who introduced us.