



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, June 17, 2012**  
*The Third Sunday after Pentecost*

*Choral Eucharist*  
*at 11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.  
on  
2 Corinthians 5:6-17  
Saint Mark 4:26-34  
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*BE READY FOR HIS COMING: FORGIVE*

Jesus liked to use agricultural images. A farmer scatters seed, and then it sprouts and grows, and there's the stalk, and then there are leaves, and then there's the grain. And one day the grain is ripe and the farmer, until now just silent in the background, suddenly appears with his sharp blade to harvest the grain and bring it home.

This kind of image, deployed by Jesus, is called of course a parable. But, do you know, it is hard to say what a parable is exactly. It's not a strict allegory where, if you just get the key, you'll be able to understand it. For instance, does the farmer in this parable stand for God? On the one hand, God does scatter seed (he creates things, and he spreads the word). That is to say, God initiates action. But in the parable, the farmer then sleeps and rises day by day as the seed sprouts and grows, the farmer not knowing how that growth occurs. Such ignorance is of course not characteristic of God. Yet the suddenness at the end of the parable with which the harvest is made does seem to point to the suddenness of God's ultimate action of bringing the world to its end.

Seeing that a parable is not an allegory, some people say that we should look to how a parable grabs us, that at the end a parable shows us something of great importance about God. In this case, as the grain grows so the point is that life is going on and we might be unaware of what's happening, but suddenly God will appear and the righteous folk will be gathered to him.

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My home town in Oklahoma, a so-called city of some ten thousand souls, had a famous tornado in 1947 that killed more than 100 people, one of the worst tornadoes of history. This was part of the background lore of my education, which included tornado drills in elementary school, and a number of early summer afternoons spent in our neighbor's concrete basement. But no tornado ever hit again, until this year, in the wee hours of Palm Sunday; six people died and hundreds were displaced by one that was sudden and unexpected; they had had a minute's warning, maybe two. Last month we were able to visit my parents, who still live there and who slept through this tornado.

I was driven around and could see the line of its path, twisted trees and such things. A tornado is a very focused thing. A month had passed since that awful night, and the debris had been largely removed, so that the destroyed houses were now nothing but flat foundations. You drive along a quiet neighborhood street, and there are several normal homes, bicycles in the yard, cars in the driveway. Then there's a house with plywood on its windows and some tarp on its roof. Then there's nothing—one, two, maybe three flat concrete slabs. Then a house with plywood and tarp, and then normal, occupied homes.

I thought: one was taken, and another remained.

And I thought: if Jesus had grown up in Oklahoma, he would have told parables about tornadoes.

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Now God is not a tornado and you and I are not farm crops and God is not clueless and sleeping while we grow through our lives. But it is true with God that everything will suddenly change. It might seem that nothing is different: sickness, pain, injustice, evil, all the old human enemies just keep on going forever. But that's not true. Suddenly God will come. And what seemed insignificant and small will turn out to be the key to the kingdom. What was high and mighty will become low. The hungry will eat, the meek will be exalted, the self-satisfied will be revealed for what they are.

When a person understands this, her life is never the same. She thinks about God through her days and through her nights. She knows that he is coming, and she wants always to be ready.

But how can we be ready?

There is only one thing we have to do. Just one thing. It's the one thing that we commit ourselves to doing when we say the Lord's Prayer.

It is to forgive other people. *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

Why is this so important? It's like this. God sent his son Jesus to reconcile us to himself, not for God's sake, but for ours. When we sin against God—ignore him, despise him, harm his creation, hurt other people—none of our sins hurts God. He doesn't need our reconciliation. He sent Jesus for our sake: the point of reconciliation is not the reconciler but the object of reconciliation. But here's the catch: the person reconciled cannot herself be the end of the process. If she is truly reconciled, she will be offering reconciliation to others, to those who have sinned against her—not for her sake, but for theirs. If God forgives us, we will be people who forgive others. That's why it is impossible for God to forgive us unless we forgive others, and why (QED) the one thing needed to prepare for Christ's coming is to forgive others.

Let me tell you a story. After he finished creating the world, and feeling rather pleased with himself about his genius in bringing about beings that could move themselves and grow and have children and make instruments for music and invent computers and microscopes and spaceships and write novels and who knows what else, he saw to his sorrow that his most special creatures had twisted themselves. Along with their wonderful choices, they were making bad choices. They were

having children, but also sacrificing children to what they fancied were gods. They were killing each other and stealing and lying and proving faithless. And they were learning complex ways of evil: how to hold anger from day to day, to be angry collectively, to nurse anger in their hearts. When one person harmed a second, that person would turn around to harm the first, and perhaps also a third, and the harms they were inflicting upon each other kept multiplying.

Now he didn't have to do anything about this, but for unaccountable reasons he did care about this creation of his. And so he pondered and thought about what to do and finally he settled it. He said: I will write these people a message. I will tell them what they ought to do.

So he put his words to paper, wrapped them in an intercosmic FedEx box, and sent the box into the world. And, don't you know, it didn't change a thing. (*End of story.*)

Now that is a false story. For the truth is that instead of sending us a message in words, God sent his Word made flesh. He had to do that because just telling people they've gone bad doesn't work.

Jesus had to tell parables because what he was about could not be put into plain words.

God had to send Jesus because no mere words, not even a great story, could save us.

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It is urgent to say the Lord's Prayer with meaning, because all this that seems like it will go on forever will suddenly come to an end. *Thy kingdom come!* It will suddenly be true. And so we must forgive others whatever harm they've done to us. How to do forgiveness, how this practically works out for any one of us, is a task for which we need wisdom and discernment and courage. I'm not saying it's easily done. But I am saying it's urgent. See Jesus come to you from heaven, not as words on paper but as a self-gift of flesh and blood, and be reconciled to God, and pass on reconciliation to others.