



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, July 21, 2019
The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Mathew Moretz, *Associate Rector*

on

Genesis 18:1-10a, Colossians 1:15–28 and Luke 10:38-42

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The Gallant

When I was little, my parents gave me a subscription to the magazine “Highlights for Children.” It was really special at that age to receive something in the mail, and I cherished those issues. There were all kinds of things in there for me to enjoy. Poems and songs. Games and puzzles. One of my favorites was a drawing every month, of say a forest or a seaside, and it would have all manner of out-of-place objects cleverly worked into the piece. It was delightful to discover all the things that were there all along, in the nooks and the crannies, hidden in plain sight, and then to circle them with my shaky pencil in triumph.

But there was one monthly feature that never failed to give me pause. It was a little comic of no more than four panels entitled “Goofus and Gallant.” These were the names of the two young brothers in the series. They were nearly identical, some say they were twins, but one, Gallant, he would have a warm smile on his face and was such a helpful young man. Goofus, although he looked the same, his hair would be askew, he would have a mischievous eye, and his behavior, you would see, was quite different from his brother’s. And the poses were illuminating, too. One issue showed Goofus standing in front of someone else, with a stern look and a finger pointing upward. And the caption clarified below “Goofus bosses his friends.” The next panel showed Gallant sitting with a few others on a lawn in an open pose of beatitude, and the caption read “Gallant asks ‘What do you want to do next?’” Right below those panels, you another diptych follows. It shows Goofus on the left, alone in the dining room, thrusting his hand out for something on the table. The caption tells us “Goofus takes the last apple.” And, predictably, Gallant, on the right, is sitting with two friends, beaming and holding out a bit of food to them. “Gallant shares his orange.”

“What a good young man Gallant is!” At least that is what I think now. When I was reading Goofus and Gallant as a child, I can’t say that it made me feel good. It was illuminating. These didactic pieces were very clear about what behavior was better or worse. But they didn’t need to use the words “good” or “bad”. They just showed the behavior, and allowed me to come to certain conclusions. And this led me to some heavy thoughts from a children’s magazine.

It would have me thinking about the times when I might have bossed someone around. Or perhaps I, unthinkingly, took the last serving one evening? “Am I like Gallant, or (oh no!) am I like Goofus?” It made sense that Goofus was not only poorly behaved, but unattractive, maybe even repellent. And so, I was given by these contrasting moral scenes NOT the kind of worry that I would be punished. Instead, I was given was the kind of worry where I was afraid that I could be becoming someone I didn’t want to be. It was a powerful awareness to gain.

The artistry of the Gospels is such that it often has the disciples playing the Goofus. James and John fighting over who would be the greatest, not knowing what they were asking. Peter urging Jesus not to go to Jerusalem. The disciples trying to send the children away, when Jesus wants the little ones to be close at hand. And, of course, there are many in the Gospels who play the role of Gallant, getting it right, truly hearing Jesus and getting the hang of his rather counter-intuitive sensibility. Ironically, these are often

people on the margins, the sick, the outsiders. The Samaritan woman at the well is readily convinced of Jesus' authority, becoming one of his first missionaries, in a way, to her community.

Nicodemus, though, a Pharisee and a city councilman of Jerusalem, a shining example of an insider of the chosen people, he struggled mightily with Jesus' wisdom, not following him, hesitating, tragically, until after Jesus' death when he helped to find him a tomb.

The most acute of contrasts comes with the two thieves that were crucified on either side of Jesus. Tradition, in the Golden Legend, gives these men names: Gesmas and Dismas. Gesmas was the one who, sharing that great pain with Jesus, derided him and scoffed. Dismas was the one who, in the same place of horror, recognized Jesus' innocence, and asked to be remembered when Jesus came into His Kingdom. Every time I hear that account read, like with Goofus and Gallant, I wonder what I would do in such a situation. Curse God, or ask God for a blessing? You may recall Jesus' response. He doesn't speak to Gesmas. But he does speak to Dismas, despite his anguish, giving him a blessing and a promise, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

But, at the beating heart of the Gospels is a wisdom that is not so easily discerned as these examples. They take us to deeper and subtler comparisons. Rather than just comparing the sheep and the goats, the good kids and the brats, there are extraordinary instances when the people being compared are actually all "good" people. They are often all "Gallant's", seeking after righteousness, and seeking to serve God as they know best. In last week's Gospel, Jesus told a story about three people who were all righteous, and trying to do good, and trying to serve God. The faithful priest was on his way to the Temple for worship, the faithful Levite, too, had to keep himself ritually clean for worship. But it was the unlikely Samaritan, faithful to his rival worship on Mount Gerazim, who lived out the true mercy of God by caring for the robbed man. All three were trying to do the right thing, but only one did the perfect thing.

Likewise, with Mary and Martha, the sisters who host Jesus in their home for a meal, seeking to do their very best, they are contrasted just like the three in the Good Samaritan parable earlier in the chapter. But in this case, one of them, Mary, is focused on Jesus, like a disciple (a bold pose for a woman in those days). Martha, on the other hand, is tending to all of the necessary meal preparation that would have been required. And this wasn't just being polite, this was being faithful, as a Jew, for such devotion surely hearkened back to their ancient legacy, the hospitality that Sarah and Abraham showed to the three strangers long ago, who then blessed them with fertility in their old age, making the beginning of their people possible.

But, Martha was not focused on Jesus, her guest, or her faith, although it may have seemed like she was the most responsible in that regard. Thanks to what she says, we know that she was focused instead on her sister in a kind of judgment that would have been happy to have interrupted Mary's mode of discipleship. "Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she helps me." Her virtue was curdling into resentment and rivalry, becoming a stumbling block to her sister. Thankfully, Jesus stops her before this can happen. He says her name twice: "Martha, Martha," as if to get her attention, to get her to look at his eyes, she who is so focused on her sister. "Martha, Martha, your cares and troubles are getting the better of you. Can't you see what is most important?"

These comparisons, these didactic contrasts, they are not there for us to malign the ones who got it wrong. The Goofuses: the impertinent thief, the priest, the Levite, Martha. They are set before us to clarify something inside us, to help us discern, not just between good and bad, but also the more difficult discernment between competing goods and various acts of faith. We hear a word from Jesus, and, in the hearing, we come to know the vivid and surprising topography of the spiritual life in Christ, a life that can lead us through so many obstacles to the true love of neighbor and the true love of God. And the more this landscape is revealed to us, the more we will find that even our best intentions can lead us astray. But take heart. As Cardinal Newman said, "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

I'd like to think that after the shock of hearing this, that Martha then came to herself sat down beside her sister, joining Mary as a fellow disciple, sharing this "good part" with her for the rest of the evening, and for the rest of her life.

Actually, the word that Jesus gives to Martha is the very word that we need to hear. And I'd like to think, too, that after hearing their striking story, that we might join them, that we might turn from our cares and troubles, that we might turn from worrying about what other people are doing, and then mystically sit by their side on this morning, listening with them at His feet, focused with Mary and Martha on hearing the word of the Lord of Life, not only this morning, but for the rest of our lives.