

Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost: Romans 12:9-21

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Now, some of y'all may have heard different versions of this story before, but back when we were still in seminary, Fr. Steve and I went on a trip to Jerusalem. We stayed at the Anglican Cathedral, easy walking distance from the Old City walls and a single grocer that hypothetically would sell American pilgrims beer. One night, while we were traipsing through the Old City, we popped into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, one of the holiest sites in Christendom. I'm not gonna describe the place in too much detail. I want to leave some of the mystery in case you ever find yourself on those same streets. Well, that place is jam-packed with people. One of the features inside is Christ's now-empty tomb. And yes, you can go inside. It's big enough for one, but they cram three pilgrims in at a time, and you have a very short window to say a prayer and clear out. It was, to say the least, frustrating. I wanted to pause in that place and soak in the emptiness. Instead, I'd just barely felt my knees touch the stone floor when someone tapped my shoulder and told me to move along. As we were leaving, I saw a few kids taking selfies, a bride posing for a photoshoot, and at least one dog gathering up crumbs in a corner. It was an amazing place to visit, but I'm not sure I really felt the warmth of it, not yet.

A few days later, I was telling a local our story and mentioned how I'd left feeling more disappointed than rejuvenated. She gave us a tip: if you sneak into the sacristy, you can convince one of the monks to let you spend the night inside; they let a dozen folks do this every night, but you gotta sign up first. So, we got all set up and ready to go, but the monk in the sacristy told us that, instead of taking our names down, just line up at the outer gates, and they'd take the first folks from there. Clearly something got lost in translation. We arrived just before sundown and took our spots at the front of the line. There were two Russian women ahead of us, one middle-aged, the other considerably more upper-aged, both with that typical babushka look: warm, long coat, scarf wrapped around the head, heavy scowl. We nodded to each other. I said some butchered version of "Good evening" in Russian well enough to get a smirk outta of them. We mostly kept to ourselves, but occasionally one of them and one of us would make eye-contact, and we'd share a knowing pilgrim's nod. We were here for the same reason: because something of God burned inside us, and we needed to come back to quench that fire. So, we sat on the curb, just outside that creaky old gate, a solid block of steel with a slide-back peep hole. Pretty soon, another joined us, a monk who'd walked all the way from his monastery in France. In brown robes and flimsy sandals, he told his story, which involved getting mugged once and beaten twice along the way. But he'd kept on walking, because he, too, carried this fire and needed a place to set it.

There at the front of that short line, the five of us were sure of our spot among the twelve and were ready, ready to set the flame aside, ready to test our mettle and sit vigil with Christ, ready to enter the holiest of holies without distraction. But then we heard it: a low rumble echoing off the cobblestones, the pitter patter of pilgrims' feet. At the far end of the street, a crowd rounded the corner, an entire pack of babushkas! A determination of babushkas? No, a brushfire of babushkas! The brushfire rushed the gate fanned by the wind, and suddenly our secure position among the first twelve felt a little less certain. Hundreds, maybe a thousand by now, pressed toward the gate, and all of us quiet, respectful pilgrims from before crammed up against walls, and gates, and bodies. Just as the push shortened our breath, the peephole squeaked open, then clanged shut. A key turned in a tired lock, and the gate screeched open. Before Steve and I knew what was going on, the babushkas took off. A backdraft of babushkas! We looked at each other, wincing as their elbows caught our ribs, and ran with the crowd, all of us rushing to reach the great doors. Now, that spark of intelligence behind my eyes doesn't always flash the brightest. It can take a second or two for that spark to catch. I was still holding out hope for a spot among the Twelve. But as we reached the doors, Steve looked at me with babushkas pouring in and said, "Oh. Oh no. I think they're starting church." So much for a peaceful night.

The Holy Sepulchre is sacred for lots of different Christianities, so divine services begin Saturday night and go and go and go, a well-oiled and well-timed rotation of Catholics here and Orthodox there. Everyone around us rushed from one point of interest to another, so we hopped in the closest stream of the slowest movers, a small trickle headed into a side chapel. There, we listened as Roman Catholic monks chanted an evening service in Latin. After about half-an-hour of soul-calming music and a good sit-down, they started moving, and everyone around us stood up. So we stood up. And we followed. They led us to Golgotha, an intricate altar up a flight of narrow stairs, and we stood as those same monks prayed the words of a mass, Latin again, beyond my comprehension but sorta in my wheelhouse. The Catholics started distributing Communion, and we took our leave. Just beyond the end of the stairs, we saw the babushka posse with delicate head scarves and sharpened elbows, and thought, “oh, what the heck?” and closed in.

Turns out, we stumbled into a full-on Russian Orthodox mass. We stood at the center of the Holy Sepulchre, the navel of Christianity, and swayed as those scowling women softened their eyes and their elbows to the sound of their own chanting. I don't have a clue what they sang, but it reached into my chest and fanned that little flame, warming me from the inside and fueling me on to something more. But as the energy swelled, it got to be too much. I needed a break. Maybe it was introversion, maybe it was sensory overload, maybe it was trying to run away from God's fire. Whatever it was, it was overwhelming. I had to get away. So, Steve and I worked back through the crowd and found a seat near the edge of a labyrinth, and there we plopped down, fire in our hearts and tears in our eyes. The Orthodox were still just right there, but we weren't crushed in their love anymore. We could watch, and cry a little, and just be for a minute. When I finally looked up, across the labyrinth sitting on another bench just like ours, were the pleasant babushkas at the front gate from earlier in the night. Again, like before, we smiled, nodded, and looked away.

In the corner of my eye, the chanting Orthodox throng started moving, and the two of them stood up and walked forward with them. Communion time for someone else, again. As strict as the Catholics can be, the Orthodox can be even more so, so Steve and I stayed put. But as it turned out, those babushkas weren't just there for themselves. Many of them brought -- get this -- gallon-sized ziplock bags, and when they got to the altar rail, they'd reverently receive for themselves, then hold out the open bag for the priest to fill with host consecrated from that holiest of sites, and they'd take that sacred bag back home to share with folks that couldn't make the trip. Think about that. They made that amazing journey and shared the most precious gift they could imagine: the Body of Christ. Steve and I sat and watched, struck dumb as that generous miracle unfolded. Our familiar babushkas returned to their bench, each cradling a ziploc bag to her chest. One looked at us and smiled again, but this time she gently nudged her friend, and they reached in their bags with warm smiles and gentle hands and gave each of us one of their treasured hosts. That fire inside leapt, and my head flushed as tears forced their way out once again. The treasure they'd held became the treasure they shared.

The story of that night could fill volumes. Steve and I made it to a total of something like seven services before we finally found our beds. Each service held another surprise, another gift, another bit of kindling for that fire in my soul. We learned later on that at Easter, the Orthodox light the New Fire right in that place we stood, right at that cramped tomb at the center of Christendom. And that fire spreads from leaping flames at the tomb to candles held gingerly to hearts. And there's an Orthodox priest who has one job that day. He lights an unassuming lantern with that new fire, and he carries it, carries it all the way back to a church in Moscow. And there, he shares that flame with other churches, priests and other pilgrims, and they carry it on to their churches. And from those churches, more pilgrims come and more priests with more lanterns. And they all carry that flame on, sharing soul fire from the heart of the world to its farthest reaches. That flame wraps around the entire globe one pilgrim's exchange at a time.

Now, switching gears, I gotta admit, this reading from Paul makes me a little nervous. He's got all these amazing ways to live up to that fire inside telling you to do what's good in the world, and then he goes and sorta spoils it at the end: "For it is written... 'give your enemies food and give them water, for by doing this, you heap burning coals on their heads.'" It's so counterintuitive. Do good. No, do better! Treat your enemies well, because you know they're gonna get theirs! It just doesn't fit. So I did some digging. And there's another way of reading this that seems to fit a little better with what Paul's all about. "Heaping coals on someone's head" could be a sort of "killing 'em with kindness" thing. Or, it could be more generous. Heaping coals is kind of like stoking a fire, stirring up those coals so that a fire that's gone out will flame back up. It's breathing oxygen, breathing life back into what appeared to be dead. Maybe it's about waking that part of folks back up, taking that dying fire inside and showing it how to roar again, fanning those flames so the brushfire rushes our church's doors and rushes out of them again.

And that's a miracle. It's not our job to be the miracle. It's not our job to be the burning bush. That's God's job. But it is our job to take that fire and give it away! Wrap the world in flame! Spread that soulfire of God! That's our job. Fan those flames. Maybe even heap some coals on. And spread that loving fire of God.

These days, it's hard to stoke the coals. So many haven't come home yet and still others distrust what churches get up to. But y'all, I think we're finding ways to burn anyway. We always have, but these days, we're managing even more. The coals we're fanning, the fires we're burning, the miracles we're passing along, they haven't slowed down, they've just shifted. Zoom fanned and keeps on fanning some new fires, and it's relit old ones. But so does this building and the many things that happen here. We've bragged a lot on the contractors doing all that work, but there's a lot of other coals, too. There's you. And we're gonna keep fanning the coals we've got, keep sharing those miracles, and keep passing God on until that treasure we've held becomes the treasure we share. Fan those flames, St. Thomas'. Heap even more coals on. And spread that loving fire of God.