

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

71st Week of Pandemic - Indoor Service

Amos 7:7-15

Psalm 85:8-13

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

07/11/2021

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

14King Herod heard of [the disciples' preaching,] for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." 15But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." 17For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. 18For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could

not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” ²³And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” ²⁵Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” ²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

St. Benedict

Good morning! How about something a little different? Today, as I'm sure you are aware, is July 11. And today is the day that the Western church commemorates one of my favorites: St. Benedict of Nursia. Since it's rare to celebrate the feast of one of my favorite saints on a Sunday, I figured I would tell you a little about the guy who left a profound mark on the worship patterns of the church. But, as always, before we can tell the tale, we need to set the scene...

For the first 200 or so years that Christianity existed, it was the underdog. Very early on we were just an off branch of Jews who couldn't get along. But as converts grew, persecution increased. For many years, becoming a Christian was very likely to make you a martyr. But then something strange started to happen. Christianity slowly became more and more acceptable. As you would expect, as its popularity grew, martyrdom became less frequent. Some Christians started to think that their faith had become soft. It's out of a desire for a more genuine faith that people like St. Anthony the Great arose. I preached about him a few years ago, I'm SURE

it's all fresh in your minds, so I won't go into detail here, but he is considered the father of monasticism. He was one of the first desert monks, driven to the wilderness in a desire for a more ascetic faith.

Then in 313CE Emperor Constantine made Christianity a legal religion. A few years later it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. But as Christianity became the de facto religion in the empire, it became socially advantageous to become a Christian, regardless of the intent in one's heart. As devout Christians looked around and saw the casual attitude of their fellow communities, they decided that they needed to find a place where they would be challenged. Enter the monasteries. Groups of Christians began to gather informally, usually around leaders like St. Anthony. But it was good old St. Benedict who gets the credit for cementing what monastic life would look like.

St. Benedict was born in an Italian town around the year 480CE.¹ We don't have much in the way of writings ABOUT him. What we have figured out comes from Gregory the Great and his writings in the *Dialogues*.² But, it seems that he went to school in Rome and was “*offended by the licentiousness of society*”³ He decided to become a hermit. And, as was

¹ González, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity*. New York: HarperOne, 2010. p. 278.

² Pfatteicher, Philip H. *Festivals and Commemorations: Handbook to the Calendar in Lutheran Book of Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980. p. 279.

³ Ibid.

always the trend in every religion, whenever a person decided to become a hermit and retreat from the rest of humanity, the rest of humanity becomes enthralled and follows them. It's comical, all they want is some peace and quiet, but we just keep showing up asking for wisdom. It was the same for Benedict. Followers gathered around and he eventually decided to start a monastery.

What quickly became a hallmark of his community was just that, community. He emphasized the need to be together, sharing all things. This meant that everyone shared the load. They took turns in all the tasks, cooking, cleaning, physical labor, everything. And unlike other corrupted groups, the rich got the same amount of work as everyone else. In fact, the only exceptions were made for the especially young or especially old. Eventually the group grew in size and decided to relocate to Monte Cassino. It was here that the monastery took off. Benedict's twin sister Scholastica, who would become a saint herself too, started a community nearby for women.

Another defining part of life for the Benedictine community was its tolerance. It refrained from the extreme asceticism that we saw with people like Saint Anthony, who supposedly went a year without food. This was laid out in Benedict's greatest contribution to the faith: the *Rule*. It was a short

document that laid out what life should look like for anyone in the monastic order. Justo L González, a church historian, says the following:

“Rather than extreme asceticism, what the Rule seeks is a wise ordering of monastic life, with strict discipline, but without undue hardship. Thus, while many of the monks of the desert lived on bread, salt, and water, Benedict prescribed that his monks would have two meals a day, each with two cooked dishes, and at times with fresh fruits and vegetables. Also, each monk was to receive a moderate amount of wine every day. And, in addition to his bed, each monk should have a cover and a pillow. All this was done only in times of abundance, for in times of scarcity monks should be content with whatever was available.”⁴

Wow... while a blanket and a pillow might not sound like taking it easy, it really was. This relaxed, but still committed community of faith gathered many others who were searching for a place to live out their faith seriously. But sadly, the community was attacked by the Lombards in either 577⁵ or 589⁶, and they destroyed Monte Cassino. While this was heartbreaking, it meant that the monks fled to Rome, where the *Rule* made its way into the hands of a man named Gregory, who later became a Pope

⁴ González, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity*. New York: HarperOne, 2010. p. 278.

⁵ Pfatteicher, Philip H. *Festivals and Commemorations: Handbook to the Calendar in Lutheran Book of Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980. p. 2780.

⁶ González, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity*. New York: HarperOne, 2010. p. 281.

and a Saint. The popularity of the *Rule* grew, spreading from Rome out through the whole church, becoming, literally, the rule for most monastic communities.⁷

While the *Rule* itself was based on other similar works, it has left a profound mark on the lives of all believers. It was from this book that the standard form for daily worship was put down. This worship goes by several names; “*the divine office, the daily office, choir offices, or liturgy of the hours.*”⁸ if you pick up that red/maroon hymnal in front of you, you’ll see their mark. You will find morning, evening, and night prayer services beginning on page 298 of the *Evangelical Lutheran Book of Worship*. If you watched any of the Facebook Live devotions I led over quarantine, you will have joined in a tradition thousands of years old. But the REAL office consists of a few more services. St. Benedict took the already established 7 and added one more. Every 3 hours the monks would gather for worship and prayer. Their names are as follows:

Vespers (at the end of the working day)

Compline (before bedtime)

Nocturns or Vigils or Matins (middle of the night)

Lauds (at daybreak)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ White, James F. *Introduction to Christian Worship*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000. p. 136.

Prime (shortly thereafter)

Terce (middle of the morning)

Sext (at noon)

*None (middle of the afternoon)*⁹

While the names have shifted and changed, the pattern of these worship services are still followed today all over the world. The Catholic Church and its priests especially are expected to “pray the hours.” Benedict and his *Rule* shaped worship in other ways too. It was in those monasteries that the simple form of chanting that we have come to know and love was created. So, if you ever want to complain about my chanting, you know the guy to blame. You may remember last summer in a newsletter I encouraged everyone to join me in reading the Breviary (the Psalms) through the month of June together. The Benedictine monks took it even further, where it took us a month to read all 150 of the Psalms (which is still a big challenge in my mind!), the monks would do it every WEEK! It was not uncommon for a monk to know the entire book by heart by the time they reached old age.

Benedict, like many others, is the patron saint of an interesting variety of groups. He is the protector against poison, against witchcraft, for agricultural workers, cavers, civil engineers, coppersmiths, the dying, those suffering from erysipelas, the entirety of Europe, farmers, fevers, gallstones,

⁹ Ibid. pp. 137-138.

a city in Germany, inflammatory diseases, Italian architects, kidney disease, monks, nettle rash, a city in Italy, all people in religious orders, San Beda University, schoolchildren and students, temptations, and my personal favorite, spelunkers. (His monastery was built on a cliff.)

While the founder of our branch of Christianity Martin Luther, wasn't a fan of monks and monasteries, it's clear St. Benedict has been a person of faith who has helped christians for over a thousand years. By the time of Luther, Benedict's *Rule* was ignored and the monks had pulled away from all around them. This went against everything Benedict stood for, his desire was never to pull away, but to become more intentional, for his communities to become places of learning and safety for everyone. Here's something that he wrote: *"If we want to ask a favor of any person of power, we presume to approach but with humility and respect. How much more ought we to address ourselves to the Lord and God of all things with a humble and entire devotion? We are not to imagine that our prayers shall be heard because we use many words, but because the heart is pure and the spirit penitent. Therefore prayer must be short and pure, unless it be prolonged by a feeling of divine inspiration. Prayer in common ought always to be short..."*¹⁰

¹⁰ Pfatteicher, Philip H. *Festivals and Commemorations: Handbook to the Calendar in Lutheran Book of Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980. p. 281-282.

And I think we can all agree, that's good news! Amen.