



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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April 12, 2015

Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-31

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

“Salt and Sugar”

If you were here on Christmas Eve you will recall that I told you a fictional story that was written by the French author, Michel Tournier, called “The Four Wisemen”. If you were not here, I will give you a short summary. The traditional three wisemen in this story each had a different inordinate, that is - all out of proportion, desire; one for eternal life, one for love, and one for authority. Each followed the star in the east searching, not for the messiah, but for the desire of his own heart. But the star led them all to the same place, the manger where the Christ child lay. And looking down into that manger, into the face of Jesus, each saw in that face the fulfillment of their desire. I said I would not tell you about the 4th fictional wiseman, at least not on Christmas Eve, but that you could either read the book or come to hear the story during the Easter season, for that story holds the entire meaning of the book and it is an Easter story. This is the Easter season. I will tell you that story now. Quotations come from the fictional book, “The Four Wisemen” by Michel Tournier.

The fourth wiseman's name was Prince Taor, prince of Mangalore, a fictional name and a fictional kingdom. Prince Taor was barely more than a child and he, like the other three kings, had an inordinate desire. Like a child, his desire was for sugar. Ordinary sugary confections would normally suffice, until the day when he was presented with a gift that forever changed the exact nature of his desire. The gift was a small square of *rabat loukoum*, more commonly known to us as “turkish delight”. This delicate confection combined the saltiness of pistacio nuts with the sweetness of sugar. And if any of you have ever tasted both salt and sugar together you know how addictive the combination can be. For those of you who haven't or who have forgotten the taste of salt and sugar – baskets are being distributed now. You are invited to taste and see for yourself. This is not exactly *rabat loukoum* but it will give the same idea. Taste it. Saltisweetness is actually sweeter than sweet sweetness.

So Prince Tao, like the other three kings, set off on a journey in search of the desire of his heart. Unlike the three kings who traveled from West to East, he was traveling in a different direction, from East to West. He had no guiding star to lead him. But he did hear a rumor that “the invention of a transcendent food, so substantial that it would stanch the appetite for all time, so delicious that if you tasted of it just once you wouldn't want to eat anything else to the end of your days” was immanent. “Was this *rabat loukoum*?” he wondered.

Prince Taor did not pack lightly for this journey. He took with him: five ships with crews, five elephants and their drivers, his bookkeeper and treasurer, a man named Draoma, and his trusted servant Siri Akbar. He took a treasury of coins from currencies known throughout Asia and Asia Minor. And, most important of all, he took crates filled with items of a confectionary nature: jujubes, cinnamon, raisins, orange blossoms, cloves, sugar, vanilla, ginger, dried fruits and nuts. One of the elephants he included on the journey was a “special young white elephant, blue-eyed, gentle, frail, and sensitive, hardly equal to the fatigues of the long ocean crossing and the ensuing marches through the desert.” In her ship was included an entire cargo of rose petals. Her name was Yasmina.

Well, this is a long story, as the stories of most journeys are. I will summarize the most salient parts. If you want to know anything about salt the best teacher is the sea. In the sea crossing Prince Taor encountered this, baptised by brutal nights and days of crashing waves and storms of unusual violence. It is in those times of tempest and peril that one begins to reflect upon the meaning of life. At the end of the sea portion of this journey two ships with cargo had been lost.

Forty five days into the journey three ships docked near the “Gate of Tears”, a strait connecting the Indian Ocean with the Red Sea. Here his servant, Siri, suggested that he stay with the remaining ships and that Prince Taor and his bookkeeper go on by land with their remaining elephants and cargo of confectionary ingredients. One by one the elephants were lost, even his beloved Yasmina. It was a difficult journey over land, as difficult as it had been by sea, through vast deserts and staggering mountains. Along the way Prince Taor was growing up, a little bit at a time. There is nothing like the hardships of a journey to transport a child into an adult. After he had lost nearly everything he met the other three wisemen – the ones who were following the star – but he met them on their way, not to Bethlehem, but coming from Bethlehem.

The three kings related, each in their own understanding, what they had seen there. They told him of the child born there and how they had beheld in him the merging together of paradox: the strength of weakness, the gentleness of the nonviolent, the humility of authority, the eternal life of the flesh, the ultimate fulfillment of love, the Divine in human form. And from this mesmerizing

description of the Christ child, Prince Taor's mission in search of the perfect confection suddenly shifted. He, too, would follow in the steps of the other three wisemen. Like Thomas, Prince Taor wanted to see for himself. He, too, would go to Bethlehem and behold the promised messiah.

Suddenly Prince Taor saw the “preposterous original aim of his expedition – to find the recipe for *rahat loukoum*” for what it was. And yet, he seemed to know that in some mysterious way, the two were related, although the quest for the Christ Child seemed now to far transcend the quest for the confection.

Prince Taor immediately set out, along with Draoma, his treasurer, and all the remaining confectionary ingredients, prepared to lay them as an offering before the child. But, like Thomas, who missed the Lord's appearing, Taor was too late in arriving. The Christ child had already fled to Egypt. But by this time Prince Taor was finally coming of age, adult age, and realized that confections are, after all, for children. So he ordered them to be prepared for the children of Bethlehem. But while the older children feasted on sweets, Herod's decree was being carried out. The younger brothers of these children would be massacred that night. Taor had faced many losses on this journey but this one was the greatest. His heart had been opened. and he had experienced pain that night, the pain of others. Indeed, the night that marked the end of an age of sugar for Prince Taor.

That, however, is not the end of this story. Prince Tao and Draoma left Bethlehem to make their way back to the waiting ships for their journey home. He had lost nearly everything by the time they arrived at the salt mines near the Dead Sea. There he witnessed a strange event. A merchant and a debtor were in front of a judge. Nearby there stood the debtor's wife, her face ravaged by grief, and four small children. As Taor listened to the trial he was suddenly moved by pity and stepped forward. “This man cannot pay this debt and he has a wife and four small children. Would the court permit a wealthy traveler to pay the sum owed by the defendant?” he asked. He had no idea what he was offering. But the merchant spoke. “I am willing to accept the sum of thirty-three talents,” he replied, “and waive the rest.” Taor had no idea what a talent was worth but he turned to Draoma and ordered him to pay it. Draoma flushed and made his accounting. “Master, our debts on this journey have been many. We do not have that amount left.” Embarrassed, Prince Taor turned to the judge and asked if there were something else he could offer. “Prince Taor,” said the judge, “you were unaware just now of the magnitude of the sum needed to redeem the debtor. The proposition you are making now is infinitely graver, for you are offering to pay with your body and your life.” Taor, however, was firm in his decision to pay: even though it meant one year of slavery in the salt mines for each talent, thirty-three years.

Salt mines are a horrifying place. There is no light of day there. The salt

burns the eyes and nose and pickles the skin. Taor had many encounters there and learned many lessons. He met other prisoners, one of whom told him, during his last year in the mines, about the amazing teacher from Galilee who provided water for spiritual thirst – springs of living water that never end. If there is anything that salt mines provoke, it is thirst. Water to quench thirst is probably the most valued commodity there. Somehow Taor knew that this teacher and the child who had fled from Bethlehem must be one and the same.

Shortly after that Taor was released. He had served the sentence. He had heard that the teacher was in Jerusalem and he set off to make his way there, determined to find the teacher this time. But he was overcome by weakness as he had not eaten at all that day. In Jerusalem he was told that he could find the teacher in a certain house where he was to celebrate the Jewish celebration of Passover and so Taor knocked on doors for hours looking for him. Would he again arrive too late? At last a woman answered and said that, yes, this was the house and she was not sure if they were still there or not but he could climb the stairs to the upper room. Slowly and with much effort Taor climbed the stairs. The room was empty. He was too late. But there on the table he saw bread and wine. Famished, he reached for it and feasted, completely satisfying his hunger and his thirst. Prince Taor, the latecomer, had been the first to receive from the Lord's table.

In the sweetness of the Easter season we often forget the saltiness of the Cross that has made this time sweeter than sweet sweetness. We forget that Christian discipleship without self sacrifice is as empty as Easter without Good Friday. After the eggs have been cracked open and all the chocolate gone, the sweetness of Easter is still available to us. It is available to us whenever we extend ourselves in self sacrifice to give ourselves for another or reach out in hospitality to a stranger. It is available every time we celebrate the mystery of that passover night or break bread with the one who opens our eyes and unstops our ears. It is available to us as the salty sweetness that comes from living out all our days in the shadow of the cross, as faithful disciples of the risen Lord. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Through believing may you have life.

(quotations from “The Four Wisemen” by Michel Tournier)