

## PROPER 21, PENTECOST 18, YEAR B, SEPTEMBER 26, 2021

The language of our gospel lesson today is graphic and even repugnant. It speaks of self-mutilation, drowning, fire, and hell. It's an awful text and a difficult one to approach. At first read, there is very little here which comforts or entices us and it's one of those texts we wish would simply go away. For centuries, preachers and professors have used this text to underscore the Christian notion that if you sin, you can expect punishment, damnation, brimstone, worms, torture, even mutilation!

Obviously, Jesus is not calling for literal amputation or self-mutilation. So, what does he mean? First, we have to put these sentences into context with the rest of the gospel. At the beginning we are told that the disciples are incensed that someone is casting out demons in Jesus' name who is an outsider. In other words, the person is not part of their little group, tribe or clique. They're like a bunch of little tattler tales running to Jesus about this person who is not following them. "We tried to stop him," they tell Jesus proudly "We tried to stop him because his practice, his path, his way of doing faith, doesn't look like ours.

Jesus's response is leave him alone. Quit pestering him. "Whoever is not against us is for us." Don't criticize someone who is trying to do right or get in their way. They're our allies not our enemies. Let's face it, we all have the tendency to get obsessed with other people, other religions, other denominations, the other wing of the party and how they are doing or believing things differently than you. What Jesus points out to the disciples is that your enemy is not over there but inside of you. If you want to talk about violent imagery don't be violent to those over there. The real issue is the parts of you that can produce violence, your own hand, your own foot, your own eye. What do those parts of your body evoke? Your hand represents your actions, your power, strength and skill that can so easily be abused especially towards others. Your foot is about what motivates you, what drives you, what moves you, and what takes you places that can lead you astray. And your eye is all about how you see, your outlook, your assumptions, your perspective, your world view that can be distorted by listening to only those who believe like you and closing off other ideas, opinions that challenge your beliefs. Jesus is telling us our greatest enemy is not over there who we think is our rival or competitor – it's inside of you. Focus on your own issues.

Jesus wants us to understand it's not about changing them to fit your mold or to exclude them because they don't conform to what you believe makes you right. Rather we need the salt and fire to purify what's going on inside of us to make us recognize that in order to practice radical inclusivity we need to do some cleansing and healing of the body within. Jesus says look carefully at the stumbling blocks that need to be excised out of our lives. We will stumble because of our carelessness, our apathy, our unkindness, our dogmatism, our prejudices, our unforgiveness, our laziness, and our fear. It is even possible for us to stumble as a result of our well-intentioned efforts to protect God, protect the Church, and protect the "purity" of our religion. We all know it hurts to change. It hurts to cut off the precious, familiar things we cling to for dear life — even as those things slowly kill us like hatred, prejudice, resentment. You know there is a place called hell but it's a place that we create for ourselves and for others when we cling to our stumbling blocks, instead of allowing Jesus, in his mercy, to remove them.

The older I get the more I recognize the radical nature of Jesus's openness, inclusivity, and hospitality. Every time I think I'm pretty inclusive, Jesus says, "Nope. Make it wider. Your circle is still too small and stingy." "Whoever is not against us is for us." Whoever doesn't oppose the beautiful and salvific works of God — mercy, love, kindness, justice, liberation, peacemaking, healing, nurturing — is on Christ's side. How unbelievable is that? How challenging for us Christians who love our institutional, denominational, doctrinal, and socio-cultural cliques so very, very much to embrace this concept?

Let me tell you a story that emphasizes this. Scott Benhase, the retired bishop of Georgia, who was in seminary the year ahead of me worked at a soup kitchen in an Episcopal church in downtown DC when he was in seminary. In the winter months they teamed up with the Community for Creative Non-Violence to bring in people off the streets, give them a place to get warm, cleaned up, and have a hot meal. One time, Scott got paired with a social worker named Bobby. When Bobby found out Scott was in seminary the first thing he said to him was: "I don't want to hear none of that Jesus stuff from you." Scott assured him he'd respect that, but privately was figuring out how he could work Jesus into the conversation and tell Bobby how his life had been changed by Jesus.

Well, about an hour into their shift, they came upon a man who was literally lying in a gutter. When they got out of the van, the smell coming from this man was horrendous. As they got closer to him, Scott turned to Bobby and said: "mind if you take this one?" He said: "sure." Bobby gently picked the man up and carried him back to the van. He held the man in his arms the entire ride back to the Church. Scott decided then that he was in no position to tell Bobby about Jesus or how Jesus had completely changed his life.

Because Scott realized if anybody is doing the work of the Gospel, then they're on the side of Jesus, too. We spend so much energy and resources arguing about who's in and who's out; who has the correct position and who doesn't. And we all too often listen to and fall in line behind voices who tell us to fear those who believe differently than we do and those who are on the outside of the side we are on. We all know that such fear leads us to a dead end or as the great theologian the comic strip character Pogo once said, "We've have met the enemy and he is us."

Jesus confronts the notion that God's activity is confined to proper channels, or involved in establishing Acts of Conformity. Jesus will not go along with a confined notion of grace. There is no copyright on grace. As disciples we belong to Christ; Christ does not belong to us and our exclusive idea of who he is. The name of Jesus owns us; we don't own the name of Jesus and what we think should be done in Jesus' name.

A journalist once asked Carl Sandburg, "What is the ugliest word in the English language?" After a few minutes Sandburg replied, "Exclusive." God's all encompassing will is human well being; and wherever that is being carried out, God's will is being done whether it be in the courtroom, the classroom, in the operating room or in the workplace.

The truth is the church, the world of politics, the world of sexual orientation, the world of races all have people who challenge us to look at things differently. They are people who ask us to expand our horizons and narrowness of minds. Jesus asks us to be open-minded to overcome our prejudices and to be ready to acknowledge the Spirit of Christ in those whose beliefs we may feel to be unorthodox.

The bottom line is we are called to serve, not to control. We are called to be examples of the gospel that despite disparity of views, gifts, personalities and

perspectives have enough grace to tolerate and include those who differ from us. As our baptismal covenant states, we all belong to the body of Christ and we must seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. Those are powerful words. This isn't just about welcoming other Christians but Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and other beliefs. Our love in Christ is about love and justice, not about building walls between ourselves and others. We need to take seriously the divisiveness we sometimes cause and work at healing those behaviors.

As a people who use the language of a family gathered at the Lord's table to describe God's inclusiveness, we need to work at welcoming everyone but more than that our welcoming God demands nothing less from each one of us. Amen.