

## PROPER TWENTY ONE, PENTECOST 19, YEAR B, SEPTEMBER 29, 2024

Most of us are familiar with the concept of a bouncer either from watching movies or having encountered one ourselves. In the movies the bouncer is typically a powerful, six-foot-tall plus bodybuilder with steel-toed boots, and a menacing expression on their face, grimly guarding the entrances of bars or nightclubs

A bouncer's job is to provide security, keep order, refuse entry to people who aren't allowed inside, and "bounce" (throw out) those who forfeit their welcome. In a broader sense, a bouncer's job is to serve as a gatekeeper for the institution he or she serves. Who is an insider and who is an intruder? Who deserves entry, and who is best left outside in the alley for the good of the venue?

In our Gospel reading, the disciples notice "someone" casting demons out in Jesus's name and they respond by donning their bouncer personas and barring the doors: "Teacher, we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

Jesus, on the other hand, doesn't see any reason for concern and tells the disciples to leave the person alone and says, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Isn't it funny how they and we go around closing doors in the name of God while God keeps them open. When you look at this story what is so wrong with this person who is casting out demons, healing people and restoring them in Jesus' name. And why are the disciples so upset? Is it because they believe he's not doing it the right way and what the disciples mean by the right way is under their control and influence. I'm sure they were thinking what if he says the wrong words or worse, what if this interloper gets a following and they would have to change their ideas of who is in.

Jesus is not worrying about gatekeeping rather he wants his disciples to pay attention to what's important. Jesus is telling them there is so much more at stake and it's what you say and do, what you focus on and what you prioritize as my disciples that really matters. He is asking all of us to look at the stumbling blocks we place in front of ourselves and each other. What kind of perverse pleasure do we take when we exclude people who believe, worship, live, serve, have different racial, ethnic backgrounds and do things differently than we do? Do we delight when our brothers and sisters fail? If that's how we react than our faith is probably insecure and tenuous if we have to dismantle someone else's faith or racial makeup. Jesus is telling the disciples and us faith is hard! And we make our faith harder for ourselves and others when we become bouncers and believe we're the only ones with the right answers or the right ethnic, political and social background.

What does it mean to be on Jesus' side? It means anyone who doesn't oppose the beautiful works of God which are mercy, love, kindness, justice, liberation, peacemaking, healing, nurturing and inclusivity. Embracing these works is being on Jesus's side. And our work is to welcome anyone who does the same. How mind-blowing is that? How challenging for us Christians who love our institutional, denominational, doctrinal, and socio-cultural political cliques so very, very much.

Jesus tell us we shouldn't worry about who is in and who is out rather we should be asking: Who is out there doing Gospel work? Who is giving hope to the hopeless? Who is comforting the broken-hearted? Who is feeding the hungry? Who is housing the homeless? Who is binding up the wounds of the suffering? Who is working for justice not just for ourselves but everyone including immigrants. We shouldn't be concerned

about a person's race, sexual orientation, or whether they're liberal or conservative. The discerning test is this: Are they engaging in true Gospel work that puts all the works of God into play and not their own distorted reasons that circumvents God's love?

Let me tell you a story that was told by Scott Benhase, the retired bishop of Georgia who was in seminary the year ahead of me. When he was in Seminary Scott worked at a soup kitchen in an Episcopal church in downtown DC and 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 him 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." He 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 witness to Bobby about how Jesus had completely changed his life.

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 has the correct position and who doesn't it weakens our faith. And we all too often listen to and fall in line behind voices who tell us to fear those who are different than us and that they are the cause of all our problems. My friends, we all must know that such fear and hate 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."

That is why the horrific reading of cutting off one limbs and throwing oneself into the sea is part of this gospel. This passage is not about condemnation; it's about reality. It is a metaphor for all the ways we choose to do things that are against what Jesus calls us to do and be. It acknowledges that we need to cut off those things that are sometimes precious and familiar to us that we cling to but are slowly killing us. Those things are how we exclude. We judge. We condemn. We compare. We hate. We demonize. We are to rid ourselves, cut ourselves off from these behaviors. We are not designated as God's bouncers and this is not who Jesus calls us to be and do.

What we are called to be is God's generous and welcoming hosts. Hosts who throw the doors of God's kingdom wide open. Hosts who understand that there's enough divine goodness, mercy, and justice to go around. Hosts who trust and understand that God delights in our diversity. Hosts who respond with joy and gratitude whenever "deeds of power" are done in Jesus's name.

Whoever is not against us is for us. If Jesus himself has declared this, then what are we doing? Whose boundaries are we protecting? Why are we still outside in the alley, guarding the doors?

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. 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 or believe in and instead 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 not just into the church but into all facets of our lives, our countries life and other religious groups lives. But more than that our welcoming God demands nothing less from each one of us. Amen.