

Proper 21B September 27, 2009

For or Against?

A man came to see his minister under extreme distress. He paced back and forth in the office until he was finally calm enough to explain that he just had a horrible argument with his boss. The minister asked, "What did he say to you?" The man replied, "Well he said a lot of things but the last thing he said to me was, *You can go straight to hell.*" The pastor said, "What did you do then?" And the man replied, "I came straight to see you!"

Sometimes the best way to face difficulty is with humor and I'm hoping my attempt at humor this morning will do what humor does best: upset our preconceptions, lower our defenses, and provide an atmosphere where we can hear things in a new way. And although today's gospel reading seems anything but funny, the exaggerated language Jesus uses functions in a way similar to humor. Jesus seeks to upset our self-righteous attitudes and help us to hear the good news of God in a new way.

There is no getting around the feeling that the language coming from Jesus in today's text seems out of character for the Jesus we depict as a gentle shepherd. What in the world is all this business about chopping off body parts? On one level, I think most of us assume that Jesus can't be serious, can he? But on another level, we are fearful that somehow he is. For sure there is a real danger that Jesus is warning us about. A danger that can lead us away from the life God desires for us. - A danger that comes from thinking we have God, and God's grace, all figured out.

We cannot ignore Jesus' harsh words but neither can we take them without putting them into context. Jesus is NOT asking us to mutilate our bodies in a grotesque effort to keep from sinning. Hands and feet and eyes are not the cause of sin. Sin is deeper than actions taken by our body parts and if we started eliminating every part of us that sinned, I'm afraid there wouldn't be much of us left. How can we tell which eye it was that sinned anyway? Everything that one eye sees, the other does as well.

So the question I have when reading this text is, "What has evoked such words from the mouth of Jesus?" What has gotten Jesus so riled up? It is the rush to judgment one of his closest friends. John, one of the favorite "insider" disciples, is trying to contain the work of God in the world within the little group he belongs to. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he was not following us." It's a repeat of an attitude that has been with people for a long time. Joshua told Moses to stop those two "outsiders" from speaking with God's Spirit because they didn't have the same experience as all the others. Humanity seems to want to control everything, even how and when and with whom God works in the world.

Jesus warns us that nothing can drive us away from God faster than dividing up the world into those whom God is "with" and those whom God is "absent". Living with that kind of arrogance and presumption prevents us from truly being present with God who makes a home in the most unexpected places and with the most unlikely people. Judgment of ourselves can be purifying and points us back to the source of life. But Judgment of others contaminates our soul and leads us to a place far away from the life-giving grace of God. A place like that rightly deserves the term "hell".

For Jesus, one of the worse "sins" – one of the most deadly poisons in our life- is "tripping up" the faith life of someone else by judging them unworthy of God's grace or outside of God's embrace. One of the fastest ways to separate one's self from God is to claim God's presence only among your group. One of the easiest ways to "stumble" and fall away from the life God intends is to draw a line in the sand and divide the world up into "us" and "them" because my friends, from what the bible tells me about Jesus, he is always going to be with "them". **Living with such a narrow view of who is "in" and who is "out" slowly suffocates our ability to rejoice in the presence of God's amazing and unconditional grace for the world.** Perhaps it is indeed better to have a great stone take us to the bottom of the sea, than to slowly damn ourselves to a world apart from the lavish goodness of God.

All of this goes back to Jesus' question only a little earlier in Mark's gospel. He asks the disciples "Who do you say that I am?" That question is still being answered. Jesus is far different than anyone expects and the grace he offers is not under the control of anyone - not even the church. As hard as that is to hear sometimes, it truly is Good News!! We have been freed from the task of judging who is either "for" or "against" God - for God knows that burden is too great for us to bear. We have been saved from the worry and despair of wondering whether or not we have been good enough to make it into God's kingdom. You haven't been good enough and God knows neither have I. That's the point. It doesn't depend on us. It depends on God and that changes everything.

The **life** that God intends for us is a life of joy, trusting that every good thing done in this world is done in the name of Jesus Christ. When water is offered to thirsty people out of compassion and concern, it is done in the name of Jesus even if that name never comes from the lips of those who offer the cup. When love is shared without condition and without pretext, it is done in the name of Jesus, no matter who shares it or with whom it is shared. When we offer words of forgiveness, compassion, healing, or comfort, we speak the words of Christ to a hurting and broken world even if we never mention his name. This is the life God calls us to live. This is the vocation each of us is given to live out with the people we encounter everyday. May the powerful grace of God burst into our lives and drown out every judgment that takes the breath of life from our lips. And may God grant us the faith to believe that we can indeed be at peace with one another.