

In the Name of the Living God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Get a hundred people together who have some biblical literacy, and ask them to identify their favorite Bible passage. It is likely not one of them...not a single one...will mention these verses from Mark's gospel.

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. If your foot causes you to stumble, tear it out. Better to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell.

What are we to do with these words from Jesus? Can we assume that he is not talking about literal amputation or mutilation? Plucking out eyes, cutting off hands and feet? Yet, in my research for today, I saw some sermons that were pretty close to that...and I would not be surprised if that theme is not being preached around town somewhere even today.

But, my spirit is at peace with the understanding that Jesus is not being literal with these commands, but that by itself leaves us nowhere. In the course of these strange verses, what is it that Jesus calls on us to do?

To answer that, let us back up.

His disciples try to stop a man who had been acting in the name of Jesus, but he was not one of them...not part of the inner circle, and he was acting differently. As soon as Jesus hears about it, he turns on his own followers..calling them out for their exclusiveness. Saying, in effect, "Who cares?" Because whatever good is done in my name will put the stranger in a situation of not speaking evil of the Lord. Whoever is not against us is for us."

What we have here, is a "two-parter"...and we can start with the later part first.

Jesus, in rebuking them for calling out the unofficial disciple, raises an issue of tolerance.

Remember last Sunday? Remember the reference to the hair treatment commercials on television? Everything about our world is a reflection of the base, human need to measure one's self worth against the next guy. You need to be wealthier than your neighbor. More attractive. Smarter. Have longer nails. Thicker lashes....and so on.

Why? Because it is our most basic nature...as societal beings...like the birds of the air, and fish of the sea...to flock together, or school together with others like us.

We live in...and have always lived in...as world of..."US or THEM". Seeing life only from the perspective of our own groupings. The other side of the fence is of no concern, because that is for THEM, not US.

But, again, he brings a child...front and center...to redirect the focus. The example of the child is not literal, but rather metaphorical.

All of humanity are children of God. All of us...each one of us, no matter where or when we live, or how old we are in the process...all of us have the inner urging, the natural yearning, to seek our spiritual home. We are each given that internal...and eternal...need to ask the cosmic questions of life that, in one form or another, should lead you and I to gather here this morning.

Many millions of people around the globe this day will turn their metaphorical backs to that search...and go it alone, in defiance of their need to seek spiritual peace...and that, my friends, is hell itself. On the other hand, many millions of people around the globe this day will turn their thoughts and hearts and actions toward their journey in life....which brings us to the other part.

Despite what the greater church has often represented over the centuries...and in many cases, still does so...the faith centered around Jesus is not the preserve of a privileged few. We are commanded, to the point of overstatement that the sacrifice of body parts would be preferable, that no one seeking to do the Lord's work is an outsider. All are welcome who are willing to join the journey, saying, in effect, "Look for the commonality. Recognize that there are many among you who might work or think differently, but do not jump to the conclusion that makes them against you, or against me."

Thanks be to God that this often strives to be a congregation and a parish with a clearer understanding in the heart of the need for diversity. Our prayer this morning is that we continue to guard against the human impulse of US / THEM....that human impulse that Jesus says, in today's gospel, will not go well for any of us at all at the time of judgment...and that is an understatement. And we pray that, instead of the US / THEM, we continue to follow the connector of Jesus by looking at life as BOTH / AND....remaining within the greater circle of sacramental communion in the very presence of God as the Father, and as the Son, and as Holy Spirit.

Amen.