

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.

This reading from Mark is no picnic for the preacher, either.

If we were to do a Bible study right now, and I ask you to share what are the words in this gospel that call out to you...what words jump out at you...it would seem, to me at least, it would be almost universal that those words are the ones which are outrageous in context.

“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 concede 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. After all, he was known to often speak in hyperbole, trying to shock his hearers into waking up, to really tune in and think about what he was saying. These are stark remarks, intended to grab us by the scruff of the neck and shake us to our senses of the grim consequences that disciples invite when they abuse one another or anyone else.

OK, but that by itself leaves us nowhere. In the course of these strange verses, what is it that Jesus calls on us to do? What IS he really saying?

To answer that, let us back up.

Start at the beginning. Jesus is REACTING to comment made by John, the disciple named here.

“Teacher, we saw someone...”

Telling the teacher on someone.

We have teachers here in this parish. We have parents here. Who among you has not heard, at some point in time, a child run up and declare, “Mommy/Daddy/Teacher! I saw Johnnie, or I saw Suzie....! Oh, the inhumanity. The outrage. The effrontery. You have heard it. You know what I mean. Tattle tale!

“We saw someone!....” That is how judgment starts.

In this gospel passage, his disciples try to stop a man who had been acting in the name of Jesus, but not one of them. Not part of the inner circle. Not part of (quote) our way of being church (unquote). And they are indignant.

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.”

There could be a whole sermon on that right there, but that would turn the microscope upon the church itself, causing each separate worship community to look inward on their particular bias. After all, birds of a feather...right?

It is the old, old hymn, which is not sung but held close to the heart in almost every faith community everywhere. OUR theology, OUR denomination, OUR catechism have it right...and yours do not. So, “Go fish!”

Jesus, in rebuking them for calling out the unofficial disciple, raises again an issue repeated in Mark.

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.

We forget that we are all in the same proverbial boat. We need to stick together, not for the sake of an affront against, a battle lodged, or a fight for...but for the sake of camaraderie and collegiality. As soon as our denominations, our church, our faith, becomes that which we need to defend, we have given up on true dialogue and openness to conversation. We have shut the doors and decided that our confessions are better than others. We need reminders about that, which is why this story again from Mark, and these words again from Jesus.

Each person is a child of God. Each and everyone 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, or some other worship or faith community that may feed and serve soul or spirit.

So now, we need to know that the goal of faith is not winning, unlike our culture. We need to know that the goal of believing is not who can be better, whatever that means. We need to know that being a Christian is not about comparison, but individual expression, as individual as the Incarnation.

Good grief, if we all believed the same way, how boring would that be? Not even our Scriptures propose that. The reassurance of particularity is grace itself, so says God's commitment to the Incarnation. Our tendency to for "we saw someone" needs to be replaced by faith's "we see Jesus."

And in Jesus, we see God. Our God is here.

And therein lies the irony of the statement, "We saw someone..."

Because the point is, do you see God? Do you see God in the acts you saw? Do you see God in the persons who do deeds in God's name? Often we do not.

And why is that? That is the question we need to ask. Why do we reject or accept God in the acts of some and not others?

If you are getting weary of being called out these past weeks, well, that's Mark. That's Jesus. That's what it means to follow Jesus. But getting called out is not always a bad thing. It gets us to see something about ourselves and, in doing so, maybe we can then see beyond ourselves.

Maybe we can see God in the presence of others around us. All are welcome who are willing to join the journey, saying, in effect, "Look for the commonality. Recognize that there are many among us everywhere who might work or think differently, and there is no harm in that, but rather celebrate."

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.