

THE
NINETEENTH
SUNDAY
AFTER
PENTECOST

The Rev.
Stephanie
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Mark 9: 38-43,45,47-48 Proper
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

Come to Jesus Meeting

One of my favorite memories of my grandmother is how in a crisis or a tough spot you could always count on her to get right to the point. She was a gracious woman, but sometimes time spent trying to tiptoe around a hard subject was for her an example of precious time just being wasted.

You always knew that she was in this state of mind if she told you it was time to have what she called “a come to Jesus meetin’.”

If my grandmother called a come to Jesus meeting we all knew that someone had really stepped in it because she did not do this lightly. And we also knew to listen up because we were about to get her final words on a subject about which she was not willing to argue or debate. I think that in this morning’s Gospel we just overheard the original “come to Jesus” meeting from its originator!

For weeks Jesus has been traveling with his closest disciples and teaching and demonstrating the radical nature of God’s kingdom; he has been showing them the kind of Messiah he really is. They have seen Jesus healing lepers and the other untouchables of society, but they are still clueless about the true meaning of Jesus’ words and deeds.

Time after time they get caught up in their own agenda. Despite Jesus’ words and actions to the contrary, they are still drawing lines that seek to exclude; they insist on setting boundaries, establishing status, and deciding who is in and who is out. They actually say that they tried to stop the man “because he was not following us.”

They don’t even bother to pretend that they are worried something wrong is being done on Jesus’ behalf, they are just upset because someone outside the “in” crowd is doing what they were called to do. Their pride of position was showing and we can almost imagine Jesus shaking his head in frustration that they just don’t get it.

And then in no uncertain terms, using very vivid and descriptive language, Jesus gives them his list or rules----or more to the point actions---- that are not acceptable for members of his community.

He says: “Listen, don’t you dare stop him or anyone else like him. No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and then later say bad things about me. If he’s not an enemy then he’s a friend. Even someone who just gives a thirsty person a cup of water in my name pleases God.

Then he really gets up into it! He says, “On the other hand, if you give even one of these new believers a hard time, or come between them and God because of your arrogance, you will create an absolute scandal. You would be better off dropped in a deep lake with a cement block tied around your neck than to deal with me if any of you ever do such a thing.”

At this point we can almost see the disciples dropping their heads and trying to look anywhere except right at Jesus, and we might imagine Jesus’ saying, “Look I know you think I’m being hard on you, but all of you have to understand what is at stake here. I have chosen you to help me show people into the true life of God’s kingdom---a world that has no time for bigotry, prejudice---the kingdom of God has no need of gatekeepers!

Then in what is still very difficult language he uses the metaphor of the Body and says, “If there is some part of you that is rotten inside that gets in the way of showing God’s love to the world, chop it off or cut it out. I promise you; you would be better off feeling raw and vulnerable in God’s kingdom, than being the proud owner of old resentments and stubborn unforgiveness.

Please do not persist in actions that do not reflect God’s mercy. If you continue and fail to realize what I am you might as well means spend your life living in a maggot infested spiritual garbage dump with the stench of burning rot your only companion. Is that what you want?

Now, this is not a conversation for the squeamish. But Jesus has already tried pretty and convincing language. He’s told them stories and even demonstrated daily how to show God’s abounding and limitless love to the world, but they just don’t seem to want to get it. Jesus needs them to know that they cannot say they follow him and still make choices that are counter to his very purpose.

To tell you the truth, these words are so hard to hear, I think I would be afraid to preach them, especially in an Episcopal Church, if there were any way to get around them. But there’s not. It’s right there on the page.

But before we crawl out of here on our bellies feeling ashamed or guilty that we might not measure up, we need to remember one very important fact that makes this difficult teaching the good news it’s supposed to be.

And that fact is this: God loves us with such enormity that it goes beyond any ability we even have to comprehend it. If Jesus Christ can speak such difficult words to the very ones he has chosen and come to save, we must know that it is because time and time again we struggle to realize that once we say we follow Christ our choices in this life matter---they take on deeper consequences.

How many of you who are parents, grandparents or brothers and sisters or friends, have seen your child or loved one slipping into self-destruction in the face of all you could do to teach them otherwise? How much does this eat you up with sadness and frustration, until in desperation you speak as harshly as you can to try and get them to understand what they just can't seem to see?

It's not anger or even judgment driving your harshness, but unspeakable love that wants only for them to have a full and complete life. A life you know they are bound to lose if they do not turn around. This is where we find Jesus today, not condemning us, but pleading with us to walk in the light of his love; to open ourselves wide even when we don't understand or are afraid. Jesus knows that that kind of self-protection doesn't add anything to life, but keeps us in a state of spiritual death.

Jesus has come to a world where people don't really want to know that the truly broken can be redeemed or that the addicted can be freed from bondage. Jesus comes to give life, but sometimes we find him dangerous because we know that to really love *him* means our lives will have to be transformed. Sometimes Jesus begins to feel more like a meddler than a savior.

One reason for this may well be that many of us do not even know that we are in this kind of trouble. We have no idea that we can live without the social and cultural baggage we have been dragging around with us for as long as we can remember.

Those who suffer this way have no idea how destructive their behavior is—or even how their fear of this kind bringing down barriers is systematically destroying. And they'll never know unless they allow themselves to think or feel differently---until they allow God to get past their hard fought defenses to speak a word of love into the darkness that envelopes them. A darkness many people don't even realize they inhabit.

Jesus comes to all of us as that Word.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus' earthly ministry opens with the dramatic tearing open of the heavens. It concludes with a ripping apart of the temple curtain. The barriers that separate us from God are torn away. In Jesus, God breaks into our stubborn determination to save ourselves and pleads with us to hear Christ's words of love.

This dramatic imagery and Jesus' need to speak so abrasively to us in today's gospel, is telling of how hard we sometimes work to keep God's love out of our lives. But for those who are in held in bondage and pain from old and festering wounds, wounds that threaten daily to rob their life of joy, Jesus' seemingly harsh words of amputation offers not violence, but forgiveness, liberation, and release.¹

It is only when we accept this gift of liberation my friends that we are finally free to love one another as Christ loves us. And in this state of grace we will find no place for exclusivity. We will never have the heart or the need to put a stumbling block in front of anyone who seeks God's love, especially in front of those the rest of the world wants to push in the shadows and margins.

As my grandmother well knew, a "come to Jesus meetin'" is never easy, but thank God for the love of Christ that cares enough to speak the sometimes-difficult words that demand that we claim a life that can give life to others---Jesus still needs us to make the choices and decisions that will call all of God's children in---into the very heart of God's grace, mercy and love. Amen.

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¹ Don Juel, "Jesus the Divine Intruder" in *The Lutheran*.