

“Practicing Pentecost After A Hand, Foot and Eye”

Rev. Tom Steffen

30 September 2018

Today’s gospel reading is as challenging as it is nearly grotesque. It is adult reading, not suitable for children, perhaps. But it is for the sake of our children, if not for ourselves, that we adults should take a hard look at these hard words, which will be easier than swimming with a millstone. There are three sentences that leap off the page at us.

The first one is “Whoever is not against us is for us,” which is a reminder of the role that “turf” plays in our lives. I’m not referring to the prominence of soil or land in our lives, but the power of the positions and perspectives, the sides we take, the tribes and subgroups in which we live. The story is told about a man who was walking across a bridge and comes upon another man standing right on the edge, about to plunge to his death. The first man shouts “Stop!” And the man on the edge turns toward the voice. “Are you a Christian?” the walking man asks. “Yes, I am.” “Well, so am I. Are you Catholic or Protestant?” And the one on the edge replies “I’m Protestant.” “Good for you, are you Methodist or Baptist?” “Baptist.” “Southern Baptist or American Baptist?” “Southern.” “Original Southern Baptist or Southern Baptist reformed?” “Reformed.” “Wow, so am I,” the walking man replies, now standing next to the man on the edge. “But tell me, do you follow the articles written 1879 or revised in 1915?” “Well, 1915, of course.” To which the man replies, “Well, I hope you can swim, you heretic.”

Who is right and who is wrong, and more to the point, who have the right to speak for God and do good things for others and who do not has been a subject of debate for a long time. Mark tells us that Jesus’ disciples witnessed someone outside their group doing good things. By the sound of it, the 12’s “chosen-ness” somehow was interrupted as this man’s “un-chosen-ness.” But they should have known better. Their own religious leaders believed that Jesus was a peddler of falsehoods and was leading people astray, they knew that Jesus wasn’t. But early on, the turf was shifting; their small group was gaining respect and popularity. And they soon saw themselves as the new establishment and felt obliged to sit in judgment of others. But Jesus indicates that he would not be a part of a new ruling class of religious orthodoxy. He was interested in facilitating a new way of doing human relations, a kin-dom, something closer to a family than an empire. He drew circles in the hopes of expanding the Spirit’s circumference, and he resisted drawing lines that can result in carving up the center, the very heart of God. Trusting that God was both the center and the expanding circumference, Jesus was able to say “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Conflict over turf just didn’t seem to interest him.

Now, I like this line of reasoning, but let’s admit that the term “us” is, itself, a turf category. Unless “us” is everybody, which it usually isn’t, there will always be a “them.” And we humans just don’t seem to know how best to relate to the “thems.” Here’s a rule of thumb: Do not hinder people who are busy doing good things, and we might get a cup of cold water from them on a hot summer day.

Which brings us to the second portion of the gospel reading. It is interesting that Jesus immediately speaks of sin after talking about how we treat others who are not in our “in” group.

Sin, *hamartia*, is a word from the archery world. For Jesus, sin was “missing the mark,” as in moving farther and farther away from the bull’s eye. His grisly images of gouging eyes and amputating hands and feet are not literal tactics meant to improve our ability to shoot an arrow, but an invitation to work at improving our sight, to learn how to better steady our hands or plant our feet so that we can hit the bull’s eye someday. To practice Pentecost is to work at seeing the target, and getting closer to it as we use our hands and feet. The question is “Are we?” What is your practice, my practice, so that we see better and get closer to God’s heart? If we are not really practicing any more, well, today is a really good day to start.

May I get just a little personal? I believe that we, no I, am way off target when I stop working to improve my own sight, or in Jesus’ dramatic phrase “gouging my bad eyes,” satisfied doing little to correct my hands and feet, but spend lots of time correcting others at the archery range. Several commentators have referenced the last few days of testimony in the once hallowed halls of the Senate as a blood bath. From what I watched of the live hearings, there was little self-correcting and a lot of “other” correcting. When we overplay the importance of turf, we will likely find ourselves missing the mark – the center of God’s heart for the whole of the created order. And the longer we miss the mark, we tend to lose the urgency for self-correction. Self-correction is a choice that requires discipline and a high threshold for pain. And I worry that most of us are indecisive, unfocused and have grown soft and mainly devoted to correcting others.

So now what? After talk of millstones, stumbling blocks, maimed bodies, fire. What now? Perhaps the context offers us a way out. At this point in Mark’s narrative, Jesus has started to speak of his impending death and is literally making his way south toward Jerusalem, where he will later die. Maybe this is the way one talks when he or she is running out of time. “It would be better for you,” Jesus says four times in this brief passage; this is the second line that leaps off the page. Better for us if we what? One writer I found helpful this week suggests that we can become “path clearers.” If we get back to self-correction, for the sake of our children, so that others will not lose the little faith they have, we may find ourselves becoming “stumbling-block removers.” What if instead of battling over turf and power, we actually help each other succeed. Debie Thomas put it this way:

“Sometimes, the process of removing a stumbling block from the path of faith can feel like surgery without anesthesia. Saying goodbye to a harmful relationship, surrendering a cherished point of view, breaking an addiction, forgiving a family member, making a significant lifestyle change, welcoming the oddball outside our group - all of these things can feel.... Like drownings. Like losing our arms and legs. Jesus knows what he’s talking about; it hurts to change. It hurts to cut off the precious, familiar things we cling to for dear life - even as those things slowly kill us.... What would it be like if the children of God helped each other to succeed? Imagine the charismatic Christian removing stumbling blocks for the liturgical one. The liberal clearing paths for the conservative. The insider befriending the outsider. What would happen if we expanded the circle, lengthened the table, and decided to feast together? We’d become The Company of the Blessedly Wounded, yes, with our missing limbs and our patched-over eyes. We wouldn’t look as shiny and unassailable as we did before. But we would be path clearers. We’d be stumbling block removers. We’d be healers and exorcists. Best of all, no little one would ever lose her way again because of us.”

Oh, and the third line that leaps out at us? Be salt and live at peace. Be salt, table or kosher or sea or grey or pink or truffle salt. Be salt; Jesus believed it was something we could be! Black or red salt, doesn't matter. Hawaiian or Cyprus, or salt from Korea, Iran, Kona, Alaska, or New Zealand – it is everywhere and something everybody can be! Peace is waiting. Still waiting. Amen.