

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 21-B (26 September 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2021-09-25 Sat 15:40>

Collect

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22, Psalm 124, James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50

1 Popcorn

Early on after I had come to St. Thomas', I was excited to discover that St. Thomas' has a popcorn machine. It was shoved way in the back of the ark, maybe a little dirty and greasy, but there it was. I really like popcorn. One of the great things about living in my home is that when I announce I'm making popcorn, and nothing else, for dinner tonight is that no one says, "we can't have that for dinner!" Instead, one of us will inevitably observe, "it's a whole grain, right?" Popcorn is usually consumed in front of a movie or an episode of Dr. Who or something. But often movies are just an excuse to eat popcorn. And whoever it is that volunteers to cook a meal, the rest of us know the only appropriate response is, "thank you!"

2 Ministry

This is a little bit like what the disciples are struggling with in our Gospel lesson today. You may remember that Jesus has been explaining what it means to be the Messiah. It doesn't mean happy, easy things. Jesus has been predicting his betrayal and death, and the disciples have been resisting. First, Peter yelled at Jesus, and Jesus calmly explained that Peter was acting like Satan, thinking of his own comfort rather than God's intentions. Then the disciples got into an argument over who was the best, and Jesus told them they had to be humble, receptive, and adaptable like a little child if they wanted to be great in God's kingdom. In today's reading, which is still part of the same story, John the apostle tells of how the disciples rebuked someone *else* performing an exorcism in Jesus' name because that person wasn't one of the twelve. The disciples are still concerned about their status as Jesus' special ones, worried about someone else moving in on their turf. And again, Jesus responds in a way they don't expect. Unlike many religious or institutional leaders, Jesus' isn't worried about others crowding his territory. Jesus doesn't seem all that concerned about someone who doesn't know Jesus very well serving in Jesus' name. Maybe that's because even the disciples keep showing they don't know Jesus very well at all, either!

Instead, Jesus suggests that anyone serving in his name, any one doing deeds of power as mighty as the exorcism of a demon or as humble as serving a cup of water, is doing Jesus' work. Jesus welcomes all willing partners.

Isn't it interesting how the defining characteristic of someone who is serving Jesus and will be rewarded is not someone who is performing religious ceremonies. It's not someone who believes all the right things. It's not someone who performs great deeds of self-denial or performs miracles. There's a wide range of people whom Jesus acknowledges as his followers, and the thing they all have in common is that they are busy about the work of serving others. They are healing others, nursing others, comforting others. They are engaged in works of justice, mercy, and kindness. They are acting in humility.

3 Stumbling Blocks

The disciples themselves have been having trouble with that *humility* part. So Jesus warns them: *they are their own stumbling blocks*. The things that keep you and others from God, says Jesus, are not the words or actions of others. The problem is the attitudes within yourself. Your pride, your desire to have status, your wish to be exclusive and partisan and exalted in your service to Jesus, is precisely what keeps you from drawing close to Jesus at all!

So Jesus tells a parable, as he does throughout Mark, warning his disciples that drastic action is needed if they wish to be his followers. To be the Messiah means to be betrayed, to die, and to rise again. So being a follower of the Messiah means cutting off the things in your life that are holding you back, the stumbling blocks that prevent you from drawing close to God. Jesus is telling an emphatic story, meant to be shocking. He's not instructing his disciples to harm themselves physically. He's drawing a comparison. If you are diabetic, if you have an aggressive cancer, if you had an untreated injury that is now becoming gangrenous: there comes a time when to save your life, some drastic surgical options might become necessary. Or, to offer a slightly less visceral metaphor, are you willing to give up salt, butter, and red meat if that's what it takes to keep your heart pumping?

Whatever it is in you that is preventing you from drawing close to God: it is time to decide which you value more. That aspect of your mortal life, or God's promise of eternity?

Next week we're going to start talking about Stewardship in earnest. But this question of stumbling blocks and clearing out the blockages sure reminds me of the rich young ruler who asked Jesus, and was confirmed in what he already knew: it was his relationship with wealth that was preventing *him* from achieving *his* goal of life in God's kingdom. That struggle seems to be endemic in our world!

4 Salt

Our Gospel reading today concludes with some brief words about salt. Salt and fire are purifying agents. They clean the wounds, stop the bleeding, and make survival more likely.

They're also useful for making popcorn.

Salt in this case might be an awareness of my own sinfulness, my own inadequacies, my own ego, my own stumbling blocks. When I'm aware of my own problems, then I'm a lot less likely to call out someone else for their problems. When we're all aware of our own stumbling blocks, we're a lot more likely to live in peace and forbearance with one another, as Jesus wishes. That other person serving Jesus may not be doing it just right but, then again, I'm not either. Maybe there's room enough in this town for the two of us.

Salt is to be used in moderation, though. I may put a little too much on the popcorn occasionally. Sometimes people with a lower tolerance will just stop eating it. Too much salt, too much self-judgment can be debilitating. On the other hand, popcorn with too *little* salt is *useless!* The salt of moderate self-criticism is the little tang that helps us to recognize and remember God's grace to us, and thereby enables us to be conduits of God's grace to others. We don't always welcome salt and fire in our lives: we would prefer to live without them. But still they come. So when they do, I invite you to remember their redeeming qualities: salt and fire often cleanse us of the things by which we resist God's grace. Thus they can help to enable us to begin to taste, even today, the eternal life that is God's sure promise.

Amen.