

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

September 26, 2021
Proper 21B/Ordinary 26B/Pentecost 19

The readings this week:

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

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

Be At Peace

This week's Gospel lesson has enough wisdom for a month of Sundays. What can be read in 5 minutes may take a life-time to ponder and practice before we have been inwardly formed by the voice of the text this day.

As someone once said:

*You can divide the world into two groups of people.
Those who believe you can divide the world into two groups of people, and those who don't.*

Jesus' disciples belong to the first group; Jesus belongs to the second.

In verses 38-41, we catch a glimpse of Jesus' disciples once again missing the point. Has he not just said them (Verse 37):

Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

But the disciples apparently did not hear what Jesus said. They did not hear Jesus say, "WHOEVER." (my emphasis.) Maybe they thought Jesus had said, "Whoever of you;" or, "Whoever of those who have been rigorously trained, supervised, certified and ordained;" or, "Whoever you happen to approve of;" or, ...

But Jesus draws the circle wider. His circle includes WHOEVER WELCOMES IN MY NAME.

Now here is what is tricky for those of us hearing this in the 21st Century. "In my name" does NOT mean simply a mechanical and literal speaking of Jesus' name. "In my name" means "aligned with / loyal to / bonded with Jesus' honour / status / mission and thereby also with the honour / status / mission of the One who sent him."

Jesus calls us to live in a world that is NOT us-and-them. He calls us to live in a world that is us-and-those-who-are-not-us-but-are-also-aligned-with-God's-love-for-the-world. Discerning where in the world are those who are not-us-but-are-also-aligned-with-God's-love-for-the-world will provide a helpful and powerful check on our too human tendency toward self-righteousness and complacency.

Verses 42-48 also repeat something Jesus has just said (Verse 8:35):

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake (or, in my name), and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

The punishment described in Verse 48 uses images drawn from [Isaiah 66:24](#). It is crucial to remember that for Jesus, "punishment" is not God getting mad and beating up bad guys. It

is simply the logical consequence of what has gone before. If you do bad things, bad things result. It's that simple.

If the verb tenses have been correctly translated into English, then this is a parable about PREVENTION not punishment: Stop doing whatever is causing you to stumble. And given that hands, feet, and eyes are a way of speaking about the whole self, the parable implies that there is no avoiding the need for such discipline. We will experience things that will cause us to stumble.

It is also important to note that this parable is a parable - it is not meant to be taken literally.

But even as a metaphor, there more shock in it than the gruesome images, because anyone who was missing a foot, hand or eye would not be allowed in the Temple. So Jesus is saying that it far more important to be loyal to God than it is to be able to observe religious practices.

And even though it is a distinctly modern interpretation, I think the parable can also be heard as teaching:

Don't pretend everything is perfect by looking pure and whole on the outside when you're in trouble inside. It is better to make your troubles known and get help to stop them now than to lead a seemingly perfect life only to later reap the hellish consequences you have been hiding from.

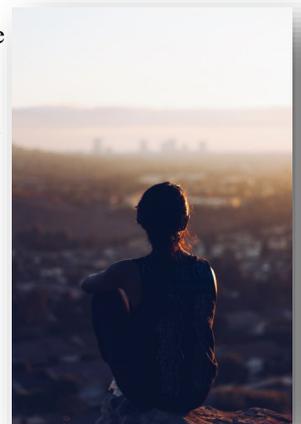
The good news in this parable is not that Jesus expects us to show up in heaven completely intact, pure and unblemished. But rather that Jesus knows we will stumble and expects us to show up lame and scarred by the inner struggle to be true to our loyalty to God as frail and faulty human beings.

There is an important difference between purity and loyalty. This parable is a call to loyalty not purity.

Verses 49 and 50 are almost incomprehensible in themselves and are nonsensical conclusions to what has gone before. The great variety among different translations suggests that even the experts aren't sure what to make of these verses.

The only link seems to be the reference to "fire." And since that fire was a reference to the torment of hell, then perhaps a reasonable paraphrase might be:

Everyone is salted with inner torment. But don't let that overwhelm you; or cause you to lose your spirit. Be at peace.



Reflecting on the Word



1st Reading: [Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22](#)

What is courage? How was courage required of Esther in this story? Can you think of other stories in the Bible when courage and faith were required of someone to accomplish an important task for God? Esther 4:13-14 is well-known as a theme of Esther's story, take a moment to read this passage. What purpose did God have for Esther to accomplish? What things were done to celebrate? Even though God's name is not mentioned in this book, God's work is evident in the events. Why do you think the writer might have chosen not to mention God by name? What can we learn from the story of Esther about the way God is working in our world today? What is required of us to continue to act as if God is working, even when that work is not evident? Why do you think God might work today in "less miraculous" ways than we find in the Bible? [Faith Element](#)

Psalm Reading: [Psalm 124](#)

The Psalmist talks about what "would have been" if the Lord had not been on our side. How has God kept you from trouble? Where would you be, or where would your life be without Him (relationally, financially, morally)? The Psalmist talks about how God helped him, not from the trouble, but through it. How has God saved you like a bird in the snare when you were in the middle of the deepest trouble? In what area of your life are you needing to turn to God as your help right now, understanding that He is greater since He is the Maker of heaven and earth? [On Our Side](#)



Praying Toward Sunday

Loving God, preserve us and keeps us so that we can be your "salty" people. Make us ready to share your good news and love with the world around us. Amen.

[Faith Formation Journeys](#)

Salt: to melt away the frozenness of God's People
To take what has been dulled
And add the flavour once more
Of tasting suffering in bread crumbs
As well as the heavenly banquet
Of tasting creation in a bite of apple
And the pain of it all
Of tasting the whole story of faith
In a glass of water
Bringing out the life
The fullness, the richness of what lies hidden
And letting the potential Change us, enthuse us,
delight us Salt: melting away what has been frozen
And setting free the fullness
That energizes our expectations
Once more

~ Roddy Hamilton, [Mucky Paws](#)

3rd Reading: [James 5:13-20](#)

Do you find that you pray more when you are happy and thankful or when you are in need? Why do you think that is? What is the point of saying that Elijah was a person just like us? Do you see yourself as being just like Elijah? Why did James describe Elijah in this way? Why do you think James tells us to confess our sins to each other and pray for each other in a discussion about healing? Why would confession of sins be seen as part of the healing process? Why do you think James tells us to confess to one another? Have you ever had a relationship (with a person or with a small group) that involved confession of sins? What are some of the barriers that keep us from having that kind of a relationship? James' instructions about prayer come right after a passage about how we must be patient in times of suffering. Do you see any connection between the two? Why discuss prayer and patience at the same time?

[Harvester Christian Church](#)

4th Reading: [Mark 9:38-50](#)

What is your number one pet peeve about behavior you see in public? Name the area of your life where you have come closest to maximizing your potential? When Jesus says "Whoever is not against us is for us" – do you tend to feel this way, or do you lean toward the idea "whoever is not for us is against us"? Why is Jesus speaking of those who give "you" a cup of water "because you bear the name of Christ"? Who is the "you"? How does the phrase "because you bear the name of Christ" affect how you understand the verse? What would be everyday examples of how mature Christians put "stumbling blocks" in the way of less mature Christians? Jesus gives us a very direct depiction of hell in this passage. How real is hell to you? Over time, how have you grown more aware of the full extent of your sinfulness? How have you grown more aware of God's forgiveness? [First Presbyterian Church of Englewood](#)