



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE NINETEENTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST**

SEPTEMBER 29, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

There are times when Jesus does not mince words. Witness his harsh admonitions to his disciples in this morning's reading from the Gospel according to Mark:

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off...

If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off...

If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out...

Or you risk being thrown into the unquenchable fire.

Ouch. And ouch. And ouch again. But, we dare say, Jesus got his disciples' attention. Ditto for anyone hearing the Gospel this morning. But, please, tell us Jesus really did not mean to mutilate ourselves!

No, Jesus did not mean for us to cut off body parts. But he did want to emphasize how important it is not to sin. So he spoke in ways very common in first century Jewish culture. He used hyperbole. He exaggerated. And his audience would have understood.

In fact, Jo and I often recall sharing a row on a Southwest Airline flight with a gentleman who had been born and lived in Jerusalem, as had his father and grandfather. In describing even current middle eastern culture, he lamented that just to get anyone's attention, you had to do something truly outrageous. Or just look at the headlines coming out of Israel, Gaza, and Lebanon today.

So Jesus was making a point and making it sharply. But he did not envision his disciples' leaving a trail of body parts as they travelled around Judea. So let's not go sharpen our knives; let's set a course to eternal life. Because what Jesus was saying was that eternal life, life with God, is worth any sacrifice.

Or in other sense, Jesus just wanted his disciples, both first century - and 21st century - to know that striving for the Kingdom of God was a matter of life and death:

...better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

Now one of the traditional incentives to avoid evil and pursue good is the threat of hell. Eternal damnation, "where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched." But did he mean that there is there an actual place where we would be tormented in unceasing flame, accompanied immortal worms? Was that what Jesus was referring to when he said, the unquenchable fire?

When Jesus said hell, he was referring to the garbage dump outside Jerusalem. And it had become the garbage dump precisely because it had been the site of great evil in the history of the people of Israel. It was there that they had lapsed into heathen customs, including the sacrifice of children in fire. It had been desecrated and understandably declared unclean. So that's the place Jerusalem chose to burn its garbage. And that is what Jesus was referring to when he used the term Gehenna, which often has been translated as hell in Scripture. In our modern vernacular then, Jesus was saying that when we succumb to evil, our life is garbage.

Maybe that begs the question of whether hell is a place of fire and unending punishment. To which we might just say God would seem to have little reason to create a special place to punish us. We have proven ourselves to be quite capable of creating hell on earth. Again, just follow news from the Middle East or the Sudan or the Ukraine. We might wonder, as well, whether God created humanity and called us good, with the intention to consign many of us to everlasting suffering. Or that Jesus died on the cross just for the benefit of the Christian club.

If Jesus was speaking with great emphasis and power, he also was conveying another message a bit more subtly. One we might easily pass over in the midst of his more dramatic language about cutting off body parts. Because before he even gets to that, he reminds his disciples not to become an exclusive club, not to believe that Godliness and privilege and power are reserved to them, his intimate band of disciples, or even to those who followed Jesus.

Now I grew up in the Roman Catholic Church of the mid-20th century. We were taught, you were Catholic, or you were toast. Or as the Catholic priest presiding over the funeral of my aunt at her home church said in the same unremitting rigidity in his refusing to offer us non-Catholics communion, "I know this isn't what Jesus would do, but I have to do what the bishop says."

Our revenge would come several years later when Jo and I attended the closing Eucharist at the annual meeting of the National Council of Catholic Bishops at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. So there we are a cradle Episcopalian and a then still Roman Catholic, both divorced and remarried, but bearing no scarlet letter on our attire. And they ask us to bring up the gifts, the bread and the wine.

It was far easier to say yes than explain our way out of it. So we brought up the communion elements for all those Catholic bishops. Our consciences were unblemished, and we have to hope that Jesus got a good chuckle out of it. Or is that smell of burnt toast?

And, in fairness, even after we were priests, the good Catholic priest presiding at the funeral of the sister of one of Jo's dearest friends in Oregon not only allowed us communion, but lent Jo a stole so that she could participate actively in the burial service. Her exploits with Catholic clergy in Calgary I will leave to her...they are the stuff of legend...and also an interesting conversation we are told between our bishop and theirs.

But every religion or denomination has among their faithful, those who believe that their way is not only good for them. But essential for everyone. One path to God. One path to salvation. We know God, and you do not. We're right, and you are wrong. Get on our path...or else. You are doomed. Every religion has them.

Jesus gave lie to that: "Whoever is not against us is for us." Now we might say that Scripture in places seems to suggest Jesus is the only way. But we must recall the context. In the mid-to-late first century, the break between the Jews who followed Jesus and those who did not was painful. Communities were rent. Families were split. Feelings ran high.

And the intense and threatening language of the authors reflected the times with all its conflict and consternation and anguish. Plus, the powerful sense of rightness that is characteristic of recent converts to any faith and, of course, to those who knew Jesus personally or heard of his life and message from that first generation of enthusiastic followers who first realized that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah.

Keeping in mind that it took nearly 400 years and the edict of an emperor who was put off by infighting among Christians to finalize our basic faith in the Nicene Creed, now 2000 years later our understandings of God continues to evolve. As Episcopalians, we do believe that what we know about God from Scripture is adequate, “all things necessary for salvation,” we say formally. But adequate does not mean complete. And we do not limit our understanding of God solely to Scripture or solely to tradition or solely to human reason and experience, but rely on each equally. And even then we live in a context of myriad understandings of God across the global religious and cultural spectrum.

Speaking in Singapore recently, the Pope said that “that religions are ‘like different languages in order to arrive at God, but God is God for all.’”¹ And he warned against spiritual arrogance and intolerance:

[M]y God is more important than your God! Is that true? There’s only one God, and each of us has a language, so to speak, in order to arrive at God.²

We come to God as who we are, from different gene pools and experiences in life, each carrying our own baggage, and all those different things we have been carefully taught. And so does everyone else – from the most profoundly religious person we know to the most primitive soul in the most far-flung corners of the world. As the Pope also reminded his audience, “And if God is God for all, then we are all sons and daughters of God.”

God may well be unchangeable, but that hardly insists that we assume as well that our knowledge of God is static or complete. Anyone here

¹David French, “Pope Francis is Turning Certainty on its Head,” *The New York Times*, September 19, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/19/opinion/pope-francis-god-election.html> (accessed September 19, 2024).

² *Id.*

not have a list of questions we hope to ask God when that opportunity arises?

Yes, we need to be true to our understanding of God, but how arrogant and presumptuous and ignorant it is to insist that our understanding of God is complete and immutable. That there is no truth beyond the truth we perceive in our limited location and moment in history. Or worse believe that we have found the only way to God, the only way to eternal life.

We might remember, too, that many good souls with very different understandings of God live lives of extraordinary love, virtue, and service. If we must judge another's beliefs, let us at least start there, focusing on their lives. That will tell us much more about their understanding of God than parsing through the niceties of their theology.

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