

Yr. B, Proper 22
October 3, 2021
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1407 Words

Lessons: Genesis 2:18-24
Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

Let's just take a moment and think of our Lord Jesus Christ...*when he felt indignant* toward his disciples.

What does it take for Jesus to express his strong displeasure? What is it that provokes his anger? "Wait a minute," you may be thinking. "Our gentle, good shepherd gets angry?" Yes. He does. And please remember that the opposite of love is not anger; it's indifference.¹

Robert was just a little boy, minding his own business in the back seat of the family station wagon. It was the era when America's longest automobiles sported fake wood paneling on the quarter panels and doors. Designers needed something to break up all that avocado-colored paint.

Maybe the most important thing to say is that Robert was *not* annoying his two older sisters who were also in the back seat. And that was a good thing, because the family was headed out on vacation. Beach chairs were piled on top of suitcases in the back of the station wagon. Something was rattling back there because of all the air gushing through the rolled-down windows.

Robert was fascinated by the power of all that wind. He had a little plastic boat, the kind you might play with in a bathtub. It probably cost \$5 or less at K-Mart, but its pointed bow pierced through the wind perfectly...up and down, up and down, side to side.

It was a big mistake for Robert to hang it out the window for the full effect of the wind, because his little fingers slipped, and the boat flew away out of sight. The little boy cried inconsolably because he had lost his favorite toy.

Imagine driving that station wagon to the beach for your one and only vacation, and your child, screaming in the back seat over a \$5 plastic boat.

What *does it take* to provoke Jesus' anger? What is it that might cause *Jesus* to express his strong displeasure with us?

That little boy is now a full, grown man. He goes by Rob and has a family of his own. A few weeks ago he asked me a favor—"I'd really like to say a few words about my dad at his memorial service if that is okay."

Of all the things Rob might have said about the long, accomplished, and interesting life of his father, this was the story that rose to the top.

"My dad hit the brakes and pulled off the road." Rob said. (I thought I *knew* where this story was headed, and it did not bode well for little Robert.) "My dad did not say a word," he continued. (Umm-hmm.) "He swung the car around and drove back a little way...parked on the side of the road and got out." (Seriously?)

¹ The Rev. Dr. Christopher Bryan, Professor of New Testament. Speaking in a class lecture at the School of Theology at Sewanee, circa 2005.

Rob choked up at this point in telling the story and took a few moments to regain his composure. Then he said this: “I will never forget what it was like, watching my dad walk back and forth through knee-high highway grass until he found my toy boat. He brought it to the back seat window where I sat and handed it to me.”

Rob had to pause again to get the rest of the story out. “He did not punish me. He didn’t get angry with me. He didn’t even say, ‘Don’t you dare stick that boat out the window again.’ He just loved me in spite of what I had done.”

What *does it take* to provoke Jesus’ anger? What is it that might cause Jesus to express his strong displeasure with us? We get the answer in today’s Gospel lesson, and it has nothing to do with making honest mistakes. Jesus grows indignant when we try to prevent him from blessing other people. Jesus gets particularly angry when we dismiss the needs and concerns of people who have less power than we do.

So, for the Pharisees, that meant women, who could be so easily dismissed by their hard-hearted husbands with a certificate of divorce. And for the twelve disciples, it was the little children, who seemed like an unimportant nuisance to them.

Who is it for us? Whose needs and concerns are we tempted to dismiss? Are they people with more *or less* power than we have? Are they more *or less* financially secure than we are? Does their race or culture or religion make them more or less welcome in the best neighborhoods, clubs, schools, and churches? Are we dismissing the health of the elderly because they are too old to matter? Are we dismissing the climate concerns of youth because we think they are too young to really understand?

I am thankful to be part of a Church that is unafraid to ask these hard questions...because I want to be less dismissive of the needs and concerns of other people. I want to be less angry about honest mistakes. I want to be *more empathetic* with people who are *less powerful*.

I want to be more like Jesus...who goes to incredible lengths to love us...in spite of what we’ve done. I want to be more like Jesus...who does not want disciples like you and me trying to prevent him from blessing other people who have needs and concerns.

The thing I love most about Rob’s story is how—as a little child—he was given a glimpse of unconditional love, and he never forgot it. It was a godly thing his dad did, schlepping around in the highway grass when he would have much rather been making progress toward the beach. It makes me ask *myself*, “What inconveniences am I willing to endure for the benefit of other people? What kinds of sacrifices am I willing to make for people who are less privileged than I am?”

The Letter to the Hebrews gives us a phenomenal look at Jesus, the Son of God “who for a little while was made *lower* than the angels” so that he might suffer...with us, so that he might even *die* as one of us.

Good Lord, *that’s inconvenient!* No, actually *that’s a sacrifice* for people less privileged than he is!

Here is what the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews wants us to see. For centuries and centuries, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets. And those prophets constantly preached about the godly virtue of caring for the needs and concerns of people who are less powerful.

All that prophetic preaching was never enough. It seems that we, humans, have a hard time *inconveniencing ourselves* for goodness’ sake, especially when that goodness is for people who do not look or think or act or belong like we do. It’s just easier to judge ‘em than it is to love ‘em.

And so, God decided it was time to fully reveal God's glory in the deeply concerned and compassionate face of Jesus, his Son. We received the exact imprint of God's very being, and he set about turning his privileged world upside down for goodness' sake.

It was show-and-tell, night and day, all over Galilee and Judea and the gentile territories. "Let the little children come to me," Jesus said, indignantly. "It is to these (vulnerable little people) that the Kingdom of God belongs." They don't have any power or privilege they can leverage or cash in or trade out in order to get what they need. They are fully dependent upon grace and mercy which they do not deserve, and they *know it*.

Do we know it? Do we remember it...remember what it is like to receive the blessing of a grace or a mercy we did not deserve? Can we remember what it's like to be loved...in spite of what we've done?

When we remember it...*when we know it*; I think it changes us profoundly. It helps us want to be more like Jesus...more gracious...more merciful...more loving!

Dear people, we have a lot more here than a prophetic sermon. We have been given the 'exact imprint' of God's very being. And he is still welcoming *us*—just like he welcomed the little children—unconditionally. He is welcoming us to receive (and also to share) the blessings of his love.

It is inconvenient...it is sacrificial...because it is intended for everyone.

Amen.