Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Old St. Pat’s, 2023

Years ago, I had the privilege of studying

 with a prominent Protestant scholar[[1]](#endnote-1)

 who often critique his own preaching tradition.

 While there has been significant change since then

at that time most Protestant preachers did not

follow a lectionary and instead selected their own texts.

Professor White complained that some

took advantage of this option

and consistently chose what he called “user friendly texts.”

 While not wanting to dishonor his splendid teaching legacy

I quite frankly wished that such was an option for me today.

There is no way under heaven that this text could be construed

as “user friendly.”

 Rather, it is one of the toughest pieces of Jesus speech

 not only the most controversial verses in Matthew,

but maybe in the whole of the NT.

Commentators have offered multiple strategies

 for dealing with this text’s shocking severity

 Three come to mind:

 Strategy 1: **the** **evangelical chickening out approach**

 = read the short version of the gospel

 avoiding much of what sounds like a divine tirade

 and instead preach about the other readings

or better yet approaching Valentine’s day .

which sounds like a ministerial copout to me.

Strategy 2: **explain everything in the text**

 presuming that a line-by-line exegesis

 Can render this text palatable.

 While an interesting approach we don’t have 2 hours

 And even gifted exegetes are often stumped here.

 Strategy 3: select **some bit of the text**

 and use it to shed light on the whole text.

 While more promising than the other two

 which segment do you choose?

 the gruesome eye gouging?

 or the one the preacher knows the least about

 like adultery or divorce?

 Or the one the preacher knows the most about

 …. not going there.

 In the end this still sounds like a masked attempt

 to create a user-friendly text.

 So I opt for a 4th strategy

 and without trying to psychoanalyze God –

 – risky business if not a potentially heretical one –

Attempt to suspend the flawed human wisdom Paul critiques

and explore the divine wisdom, even motivation

behind this difficult gospel.

Vatican II asserts that the church has much to learn from the world[[2]](#endnote-2)

maybe this Valentine weekend provides a useful prism

for discerning the holy passion behind this challenging text.

Even though the church doesn’t officially celebrate St. Valentine[[3]](#endnote-3)

US society celebrates this feast turned holiday with decided gusto

 throughout this “Valentine’s weekend.”

 Economists predict that, while still below pre-pandemic levels

we will shell out almost 26 billion dollars on this holiday[[4]](#endnote-4)

 making it the 4th biggest commercial holiday of the year.

It is a season often marked by extravagant display,

e.g., back when they were talking

Angelina Jolie $30,000 on a 200-year-old olive tree

 for Brad Pitt who seems to have a thing for olives.

Kim Kardashian got a living room full of roses one year,

Complete with Kenny G serenading in the midst of the roses.

Beyonce once got a platinum cell phone from Hubby Jay-Z

Not to be outdone, one year David Beckham gave Mrs. Spice

an $8 million dollar Bulgari necklace.

Such extravagance is certainly beyond the pale,

 and though embarrassing giving the grinding poverty

so many endure around the globe

these levels of excess still intrigue if not awe us.

While baptism does not promise us earthly wealth

 it does enfold us in the extravagant love

 of an outrageously demanding

 impossibly persistent God.

It is scandalous that God would ask for so much: “be perfect”

 and indulge in such gospel exaggeration:

 like being condemned to hell for calling someone a fool!

but no more scandalous than what God did for us

 in the living, dying and rising of Jesus Christ.

But what should we expect

 from a God whom Jack Shea[[5]](#endnote-5) describes as an “insomniac,

 pacing the night sky …

 two star-blazed eyes raking the earth” for us.

 It is almost laughable that the eternal “Hound of heaven”

 who holds sway over galaxies and nebulas,

yet yearns for the attention of his creatures.

 That the Holy One who infused the Son with life-giving blood

 so that he could pour it out in love for us.

*Unlikely Friendships* is a New Your Times bestseller by Jennifer Holland

That describes unusual, even outrageous stories

Of animal bonding across species.

There is the Canadian Great Dane who found a baby fawn

took charge to raising it until it could return to the forest

though the grown deer still comes back for visits.

 Or the English donkey who rescued a sheep

 from an attack by a pit bull

 and stayed by the sheep’s side until it healed.

 Maybe most bizarre is the orphaned baby hippo

 who chose a 130-year-old giant male tortoise

 as its surrogate mom when it arrived at a Kenyan zoo.

 Equally bizarre was the male tortoise response

Not only because of their age and sex differences

But also because tortoises never raise their young.

Cockatoos and cats

 lowland gorillas and kittens

 snakes and hamsters

 rhinos and Billy goats: strange bedfellows to be sure.

 None hold a candle to the coupling of God and humankind

 and the Holy One’s attachment

 to this most fickle and imperfect species we call human.

Playwright William Congreve famously wrote

“hell hath no fury like a woman scored.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

 Today’s gospel proves him wrong

 Revealing the God of Jesus Christ

so often spurned, even by the baptized

 Could still be so passionate about us.

But the illogical love of this divine stalker goes even further

 as evidenced in today’s Gospel tirade

 revealing that this daft divinity, infatuated with humanity

 is in no way jealous or exclusive.

 On the contrary, God wants us to love every other creature

 with the same passion, the same consistency

 the same faithfulness, the same charity

 revealed in Jesus, who loved us unto death.

 Even though God recognizes our very flawed nature

 the gospel yet demands litmus tests of care and purity

 modesty and charity

 I doubt that Francis of Assisi or his papal name’s sake

 could meet this high bar.

In his incriminating poem, “As I walked out one Evening”[[7]](#endnote-7)

W. H. Auden writes:

*'O look, look in the mirror,
   O look in your distress:
Life remains a blessing
   Although you cannot bless.*

*'O stand, stand at the window
   As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbor
   With your crooked heart.*

Happily, even in this crooked, skewed and listing world

 There are still glimpses of that purity of care

 That Jesus seems to be pummeling us toward: a true story.

 A middle school football team in Michigan[[8]](#endnote-8)

 schemed without their coach’s knowledge

 to create a small miracle for Keith

 a classmate with learning disabilities

 who struggles with boundaries in the sweetest of ways

 giving everyone he meets hug after hug.

 Keith had been invited onto the football team

 but obviously never scored a touchdown.

 During one game the team moved the football

 as close to the goal line as possible without scoring

 actually taking a fall on the 1-yard line.

 Fans were not happy.

Keith was then surrounded by every player, given the ball,

 And pushed into the end zone for a score.

Network news interviewed the team’s 14-year-old wide receiver

 Justice Miller, who said that they just wanted Keith

to have a memorable experience.

When the interviewer asked him how he experienced it

 it was clear that Justice was profoundly changed as well,

reporting that after the event he had the widest smile

 that nothing could wipe off his face.

then, this young theologian reflected:

 *you know, Keith has never been cool or popular*

 *and he went like from being pretty much a nobody*

 *to making everyone’s day*.

Justice also admitted that it was not his idea

 But in the final moments of that interview

 with tears running down his cheeks said:

*I went from somebody who mostly cared about himself*

 *And my friends to caring about everyone*

 *And trying to make everyone’s day in everyone’s life*

*You shall love your crooked neighbor*

*With your own crooked heart.*

In about 8 months we will hear a section from Matthew’s gospel

in which Jesus tells his disciples not to fear

because he will be with them always

 The primary way Jesus chose to fulfill that covenant

 was to impart his spirit to the baptized.

When the interview asked Keith’s mother

about the meaning of the event for Keith

 She said she knows that somebody

will always have his back from now

 until the day he graduates

\*Covenant hymn

Jesus demands we do the same

 in all of our imperfections, in all of our crooked ways

 to have the backs of equally flawed friends, family and strangers

 from now until each of us graduates into the eternal banquet.

 That covenant is achieved by stopping evil before it escalates:

 no anger ... too often a trigger for killing;

 no lusting ... too often a trigger for infidelity;

 no false oaths ... too often a trigger for greed.

 Sounds extreme, and it is

but in these days of too many mass shootings,

too much racial prejudice, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia,

too much war and poverty and polarization

extreme measures seem necessary.

God has forged a covenant with every member of humankind

 something, as Paul reminds us,

 the leaders and governments of this age

do not know always grasp

certainly not as well as a middle school football team does.

 In this eucharist we rehearse that covenant

 And our response to it

 So that we might choose rightly, live justly

 And love peaceably ... through Christ our Lord.

1. <http://liturgicalleaders.blogspot.com/2008/09/james-white.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Gaudium et spes,* no. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The Roman Calendar has the feast of the Apostles to the Slavs, Cyril and Methodius. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://nrf.com/media-center/press-releases/consumers-plan-increase-valentines-day-spending-nearly-26-billion> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. John Shea, *The Hour of the Unexpected* (Niles IL: Argus, 1977), 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Mourning Bride* (1697), Act III, scene 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <https://poets.org/poem/i-walked-out-one-evening> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ejh\_hb15Fc [↑](#endnote-ref-8)