Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Old St. Pat’s, 2021 (8:00 and 10:00 am)

Among other things

this wonderful community is celebrated for its hospitality

a gift not only to visitors and members of the assembly

but even to presiders …

for it allows me to be with you on a regular basis.

Because of my somewhat erratic teaching and travel schedule

The staff invites me weeks in advance,

- Like the other great preachers here -

To let them know what days we are available

And crafts the presiding schedule around our preferences.

One of the things that I have never done

When contacted by Skye or Keara or Fr. Ken

About my availability

Is to consider the lectionary readings on my open dates

And allow them to influence my availability.

While such a consideration probably would not have

Stopped me from signing up for today

I certainly would have at least balked about being here

Given these very difficult texts.

Decades ago, I had the privilege of studying

with the celebrated Methodist liturgical scholar James White

Who promoted the value of the lectionary

When lectionary usage was seldom employed

by U.S. Protestants preachers,

who instead, would select the biblical passages

upon which they would preach.

Professor White observed that with some regularity

Preachers would choose innocuous or safe scriptures

as the basis for preaching: he called them “user friendly texts.”

He said, by contrast, the lectionary is not safe

As it assails us week after week with

What he characterized as “The sword of God’s word.”

His comments could hardly be truer than for today's readings

one of the toughest amalgams

of remonstrations and chastisements scripturally imaginable,

including Moses' challenge

to the territoriality and jealousy of Joshua

in the first reading

James’s tirade against the rich

and jabs against employers

in the second reading

and then that gospel from Mark

in which inept disciples crash and burn

in their attempts to corral the Jesus spirit.

In response the Only Begotten uses

some of the most severe and condemnatory language

that punctuates the gospels.

Maybe I should have been on vacation this week.

But I’m not, and you’re not … so let’s make some sense of it all.

One helpful move for me when broaching the gospel

The most problematic of all of these texts for me

Though that second reading comes in a close second

Is to recognizes that the language about

Drowning by millstone

Hand maiming

Foot amputations

And eye gouging [what a list!]

Are exaggerations cast in the form of a proverb.

Now I usually think about a proverb as something like

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder,” or

“A chain is only as strong as its weakest link”

Rather than some threatening language about

Disfiguring or mutilating one’s body.

On the other hand, there are clear literary clues here

about the proverbial and exaggerations.

The Book of Proverbs has at least 19 verses

That employ the “better than” formula

we hear in today’s gospel, such as

“better is a little righteousness than ill-gotten gain,”[[1]](#endnote-1) or

“being wise is better than being strong.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

There is good evidence that Jesus had broad knowledge

of the forms and content of the Hebrew Scriptures

so it is not unlikely that he could riff upon this form.

As for the exaggeration part,

Those same Hebrew scriptures prohibit self-laceration[[3]](#endnote-3)

And we are accustomed to St. Paul

Talking about the community as a body

About the disjunct parts of that body

And even occasionally about “cutting off”

Someone from that body if they are a source of discord.

It might also help to understand

That Mark appears to be addressing

A division between his own and another Christian community

Reminding us that sometimes

Not only inter but intra-religious divisions

Are some of the most savage.

There is a decidedly untrue story

of a man walking across a bridge

when he saw a man standing on the edge about to jump

He ran over and said “don’t jump”

When the distraught person asked “why not”

The Good Samaritan said, “there’s so much to live for.”

And then he asked are you religious or atheist?

And the man answered “religious”

The Good Samaritan said, “me too! You Christian or Buddhist?”

He said “Christian” and the Good Samaritan said, “me too!”

Are you Catholic or Protestant?

And the answer came back “Catholic”

And the Good Samaritan said, “me too!”

Roman Catholic or Eastern Rite?

“Roman Catholic” was the answer with the “me too” echo.

Do you belong to a parish?

And the newfound friend said, “Yes, St. Formaldehyde’s”

Which got a “Wow me too!” response.

You a fan of Pope Francis or Pope Benedict

To which the other said “Pope Benedict”

The Good Samaritan then abruptly turned his back,

Walked away and said, “go ahead and jump!”

Virtually every metric available today

Demonstrates that alienation, intolerance and polarization

Are on the rise

In and between religions

In and between cultures

In and between societies

In and between nations.

As one indicator, a recent pole documents

That in today’s political climate 62% of U.S. Citizens

Do not tell the truth about their feelings or beliefs

Because they might offend someone.

On the darker side, over 50% of those with strong liberal views

Supported firing business executives

If they personally donated to Trumps’ reelection campaign!

A much higher level of intolerance than so called conservatives.[[4]](#endnote-4)

And what’s the Jesus response to this growing alienation

What one blogger called “enemy-creep”

Beyond metaphorical hand removal

Millstone drowning

Or self-mangling?

In the succinctness so typical of the Only begotten

It’s in a cup of water.

“Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink

Because you belong to Christ

Amen I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.”

An evangelical preacher, David Roberts,

once offered a reflection on this Markan text

rooted in his own question for Jesus

he characterized his dilemma as either following

the way of the ax or the way of cold water.[[5]](#endnote-5)

He recounts his faith journey

recalling that he lived with a bible in one hand

and an ax in the other

He was taught to avoid temptation and resist sin and secularity

so he axed rock music from his life

he axed a girlfriend who wouldn’t pray within him

he axed friendships and even college choices

all in the name of avoiding temptation.

He had whittled, even shrunk his understanding of God

whose power mostly lay in the threat of punishment

rather than love and grace.

Then he turns to this section of Mark’s gospel and comments:

notice how ridiculously high the bar is when faith is centered in the avoidance of punishment and sin and the pursuit of a perfect life without sin. You’ll have to cut off parts of your body, pluck out your eyes, and disfigure yourself.

Essentially, Jesus is saying if you want a perfect life, the only way you will be able to do that is to incapacitate yourself completely, to go through life so mutilated and so maimed you literally can’t do anything but exist.

Now, notice on the other hand how ridiculously low the bar is when faith is centered in acts of generosity. One cup of cold water. That’s it. One cup is enough for an eternal reward.

Last month I traveled internationally for the first time in over 2 years

It was nerve wracking with new tracking apps

COVID tests to get in and out of the country

And limited plane schedules forcing me to travel to Madrid

Only through Dallas-Fort Worth

My 15-hour transit gave me time to read and sleep

But also watch some videos.

While I could have watched the entire Harry Potter series again

Lord of the Rings, or catch up with the Marvel universe

I opted for animated shorts over action adventures

Foreign films over Hollywood franchises

But especially gravitated towards documentaries.

The one that caught my attention the most

which I watched three times over the course of my travels was

“Finding 52: The search for the loneliest whale in the world”[[6]](#endnote-6)

The focus is an individual whale of unidentified species

who calls or “sings” at the unusual frequency of 52 hz

Higher than other whales following the same migratory patterns

Like blue whales from 10-39 hz

Or fin whales at 20 hz.

The whale has been detected in many locations since the 1980’s

But always singing out alone, with no detectable response.

Over the decades it has sparked international interest

And a contention by many

That it is the perfect image of modern-day life

With so many people singing out alone and no one answering.

While the Jacque Cousteau like adventure never spots no. 52

The film does end with what one critic calls “a rapturous surprise”

Spoiler alert:

At the end of the movie collaborating scientists report

That sound buoys in the ocean not only detected whale 52 calling

along previously documented migratory paths

But they reported that its responses were being answered.

It was no longer the loneliest whale in the world

It had a friend, maybe even a mate.

In the today’s gospel the disciples condemn someone

In concert with the spirit of Jesus

Because “he does not follow us”!

The pronoun is alarming - they did not follow us, rather than

They did not follow YOU …

Did not follow the cup-of-water-Christ

Whose generosity is often too much for us

So the disciples got out the “us” ax.

The word today helps me reimagine my enemies

My adversaries

My political antagonists

My religious rivals …

As spiritual and personal no. 52s …

Calling out at a frequency I am not calibrated to hear

So I cut them off from the pod

Excommunicate them from the clan

Rather than tuning to their frequency

Where I might not only hear the voice of need

Or isolation, or friendship

But also hear the voice of God.

While children of God since our conception

It was at the baptismal font that we became followers of Christ

An eternal event that occurred with the pouring

Of what amounted to a simple cup of water …

We don’t allow axes at baptism.

And so in this age of so much division and intolerance

We metaphorically take up that baptismal instrument

Recalibrating ourselves to every unaccustomed

Even unwelcome frequency

Cup of water in hand, as we pray:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace

Where there is hatred, let me so love

Where there is injury pardon

Where there is faith

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

1. Proverbs 16:8 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Proverbs 24:5 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. the exegesis by D. Mark Davis at <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/09/the-church-at-odd-with-itself.html> for this section [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.cato.org/survey-reports/poll-62-americans-say-they-have-political-views-theyre-afraid-share#introduction> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2015/09/the-way-of-cold-water-a-homily-on-the-hyperbole-of-heaven-and-hell-mark-938-50/> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/52-hertz\_whale [↑](#endnote-ref-6)