

**Proper 21**

**Year B**

Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29

Psalm 19:7-14

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

*“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer.”*

My son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter live in Tampa. Often, when I visit, I take time to go to a museum and walk in a park. During one visit, as I walked along the river, I noticed someone waving at me. The only people I know in Tampa are the three members of my family, so I was puzzled and slowed down to figure out what they wanted. I assumed they were going to ask me to support a cause they were involved in.

As the group of young people got closer, one of them asked, “Can we talk with you about God?” Although it was the last thing I expected, I agreed to have the conversation, and as I look back on the conversation, my arrogant response echoes in my mind—Sure, am always glad to talk about God. I’m an Episcopal deacon.

These three enthusiastic evangelists and I had a very positive, robust discussion about the nature of God and about what we each believe about judgement and holiness. Sometimes, I realized I was offering quotes from the Book of Common Prayer in response to a quote they were providing from the bible to support their understanding of God.

At the end of our conversation, they invited me to visit their church which was visible across the river. I had seen the banners outside the church inviting people for bible study and worship. It was then I learned that they were Baptist. In the end, I encouraged them to continue to study and to question deeply; to question the way many people ask questions of Jesus. Through our questions we continue to learn to live as Jesus calls us to. As I walked away, I realized I was speaking to myself as much as I was speaking to them. And that the Holy Spirit was present in our exchange.

Over the next several weeks, our readings from Mark’s Gospel continue to lay out what discipleship looks like. Still centering the child who is still sitting with Jesus in the conversation and within the group, Jesus focuses on those who follow him are to care for those who are oppressed and exploited.

Perhaps Jesus’ teaching is too difficult for some and in what seems like a distraction, John, comes to Jesus expecting Jesus to draw a line in the sand about who is in and who is out. Can someone outside of their inner circle cast out demons? Notice that John says, “he wasn’t following **us**.”

John’s division between us and them has been human trait through the centuries. Social Psychologists have found consistent evidence that the human brain functions most efficiently when it can sort things—and people—most often using binary categories.

Those categories can be reinforced and given specific value in our lives so that we can get through each day effectively, avoiding things that are dangerous or that we don't need to focus on. While initially helpful, using binary distinctions without digging deeper lead people away from being open to the Holy Spirit and the work of discipleship that Jesus invites us into.

Rather than doing as John had hoped which was for Jesus to agree to the “us vs them”. Jesus doesn't draw a line or agree with John. He reminds him what he has been showing the disciples through his teachings and actions. Jesus tells John directly that anyone working to bring about God's kingdom is a follower. Jesus reminds John that people are not to be followers of the disciples. They are to be followers of God. Jesus' words direct the disciples and us to see beyond our initial responses to people around us.

Jesus has been teaching through action and parables, and today, perhaps realizing that the disciples weren't quite getting what it means to follow him, Jesus uses hyperbole. His examples are extreme, but like any good teacher or storyteller, he does what is necessary to grab their attention.

What is Jesus—who teaches peace and nonviolence—saying to us when he tells us to cut off a body part that causes us to stray from the way of love that he calls us to?

Remember that Jesus has been turning old thinking upside down through his teaching and has turned from evil and violence. In this context Jesus is not being literal, rather, he is challenging the disciples and us to look at what turns us away from God and from each other. That millstone around my neck—maybe it is the emotion that arises in me when someone challenges me. If I respond with anger or if I am dismissive of that person's very humanity, I am the one who ends the possibility of understanding or relationship. If I become jealous about someone's gifts, like Joshua or John or their ability to continue to do things I can no longer do, I may be unwilling to reach out my hand to them because I have become stuck and have turned away from exploring a deeper relationship or to focus on my own gifts.

This difficult passage calls us into self-reflection as a community and as individuals. What in our lives stands in the way of deepening our relationship with God? What roadblocks to Christian life do we put in the way for people? How do we use our shortcut, “us vs them” thinking to turn away from people we don't agree with or people who bring out uncomfortable emotions in us? What will it take to open ourselves to the possibilities of getting to know someone more fully?

When I think about that conversation with the evangelists by the river in Tampa, I realize that I led with my identity as an Episcopalian and a clergy person. The young evangelists led with their identity as followers of Jesus. They talked about discipleship—their understanding of what it means to follow Jesus and to be holy. I talked a lot about what I believe as an Episcopalian.

Whether it was fear, anxiety, or arrogance, like the disciple John or like Joshua, I drew lines, a line of religious identity and another line of clericalism.

With today's Gospel, Jesus grabs our attention to remind us that that if we are to share the Good News as we are called to do, we have to discard our fears. We must stop

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clinging to lines we draw that divide “us and them” including lines of partisan identity, religious identity, geographic identity and other identities that you can name, reflect on, and imagine.

I invite you to consider how Jesus has grabbed our collective attention to refocus our lives to deepen our relationship with God, making the time for our relationship with God, tossing aside those things that are stumbling blocks to our experience of God or for others to know God. When each of us and when the community does this, we will be able to experience the work of the Holy Spirit to transform our lives. This will allow others to share their experiences of the Good News, or their need for the Good News as we share the Good News with them.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, we will see God’s image in others and be God’s image to others. We will more fully understand the hurting of the world, especially the hurt that leads to the tendency to draw distinctions between us and them and between those who are inside and those who are outside the circle.

As we listen and walk alongside others, then the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts will be visible in the world through our actions and our love.