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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

September 15, 2024

Proper 19, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Proverbs 1:20-33](#)

[Psalms 19](#)

[James 3:1-12](#)

[Mark 8:27-38](#)

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You know what feels good? Being in the right.

Let me give you an example. Let's say you're married, and your spouse was supposed to buy milk. And you go to pour your morning coffee and you open the fridge to look for the milk and there is NO MILK FOR THE COFFEE.

And many of the feelings associated with this moment are negative.

Disappointment at not having milk, and maybe some mild anger, or shall we say indignation, at your spouse for forgetting it. And those feelings are appropriate.

But we are human beings. And if you search your heart, perhaps you may agree—unless you're a better human being than I am—that in this moment your disappointment and your anger might also be accompanied by a tiny little shiver of pleasure—and let's name it what it is, a sinful pleasure—because here is an opportunity to be not just angry but RIGHTEOUSLY ANGRY.

So you might act wounded and say, “Why didn’t you buy milk? You NEVER remember to buy the milk.” Or perhaps you might opt to savor the more subtle pleasures of passive aggression and say “Don’t worry that you forgot the milk, honey. It’s OK. I’ll drink it black this time.”

You are in the right and your spouse is in the wrong. And unlike all those other times when you were in the wrong, this time you are the aggrieved party. You are the good guy. You are the righteous one.

It feels good to be the righteous one. And we are never in more spiritual danger than when we are in the right, or think we are. When we think the moral ledger is in our favor and we have some credits to spend. When we have a grievance that we believe puts us on God’s side, or God on ours, and that gives us license to go on the offensive in return—whether that’s as small as a smug word to a loved one, or as large as an act of violence against an enemy.

Back when I was in college there was a cult movie called *The Boondock Saints*, about two young men who appoint themselves vigilantes to rid Boston of its mafia underworld. They go into a Catholic church and recite a bizarre prayer full of mangled Latin words before the altar, then go out in God’s name to execute justice by executing thugs. It was a fun action movie if you’re into that kind of thing, but absolutely, completely, one hundred eighty degrees opposite what Jesus says in the gospel today. “I am going to Jerusalem to be rejected and killed,” he says, “and if you think I’m the Messiah you’ve been waiting for, then the way to follow me is to take up your cross, deny yourself, be willing to give up your life.” What he clearly doesn’t say is, “Take up the cross as a battle emblem and go out and vanquish your enemies in my name, because you are in the right and God is on your side.”

We might laugh at *The Boondock Saints*. But that impulse to vengeance, to punishing evil in God's name, is in each one of us, individually and collectively, and it can be hard to guard against.

This week we marked the twenty-third anniversary of a horrific act of violence on September 11, 2001, perpetrated by people who believed they were doing God's will and that gave them license to hate and murder. That act of vicious evil created a trauma in this nation's life that still affects us profoundly today. And arguably one of the ways we as a society responded was by taking the stance of the aggrieved and righteously wronged one who now has license to lash out with violence of our own, a stance that led to the death of hundreds of thousands of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan, to atrocities at Abu Ghraib and human rights tragedy at Guantánamo, to drone strikes overseas and domestic surveillance at home, and to a level of polarization and mutual suspicion that threatens to overwhelm us even now. In saying these things I don't mean to minimize the reality that many served honorably and heroically in these wars and that they included motives of idealism and democracy-promotion and self-sacrifice. Rather I want to say simply that violence begetting violence is not the end of violence. And what we saw happen in this country and Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere after 9/11 is arguably not too dissimilar to what has happened in Israel and Gaza and the West Bank after October 7, and in so many other places throughout the course of time.

In Jesus' place and time, the people of Judea and Galilee were oppressed under the military rule of Rome. They were being wronged. And one hope that some had was that God would send an anointed leader to push the Romans out, to punish them, to act in God's name and set things right. When Peter named Jesus as the Messiah, he

surely hoped that was about to happen. So when Jesus told him what it really meant to be the Messiah—that it wasn't about victory and retribution but about rejection and patient endurance—Peter couldn't grasp it. It made no sense. So he took Jesus aside to talk some sense into him.

And Jesus said “Get behind me, Satan!”—harsh words, but meaning, I think, that Peter here is playing the role that the real Satan played when Jesus was in the desert after his baptism—the role of the tempter who tries to distract Jesus from his true mission, who dangles the world's ideas of success in front of him instead of the true success of perseverance and faithfulness to God. And then Jesus makes that clear when he says, “You are not setting your mind on God's things but on human things.”

And Peter will come to experience a different kind of joy than the joy of being right. The theologian James Alison calls it “the joy of being wrong.” It's the liberation that comes from the gift of God's grace. It's the gift of abandoning the moral ledger. It's the gift of knowing that all of us are completely in God's debt and yet God is not a creditor who keeps accounts but one who wipes them clean. It's the gift of letting go of the need to take vengeance on those who have done us evil, even great evil, knowing that we and they are in God's hands and that it's not for us to appoint ourselves God's agents of justice. It's a gift that comes at a cost, yet it's a cost that has been paid for us on our behalf before we even knew we needed it. It's a gift that opens up a new way of life beyond the cycle of violence and retaliation and opens up the possibility of healing and reconciliation.

Tradition has it that the Gospel of Mark was written by a disciple of Peter and that its remembrances of Jesus come from Peter's testimony. If that tradition has any truth to it, I think it's poignant that this story was included. It means Peter was so

grounded in his identity in Jesus that he was able to share this story where he got it so wrong. He had the humility and honesty to show himself as a vulnerable disciple, a learner, someone who needed to be put in his place behind Jesus. And he did learn, and his own martyrdom would show how thoroughly he learned to walk in the steps of his Lord.

May we learn to walk in those same steps, to let go of being right and seek instead to be faithful, to seek reconciliation instead of retribution, and walk simply in the path of the cross that is beyond all expectation the path of joy and life.