

## A Cup of Water...Salted with Fire

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21 (26) B, September 26, 2021

The texts set before us this Sunday remind me one of my favorite Episcopal Church cartoons. It's a two-panel one. In the first, the preacher reads the gospel for that Sunday: Matthew 19:21 (or Luke 18:22; they're pretty much the same): "If you desire to be perfect," replied Jesus, "go and sell all that you have, and give to the poor." The cartoon congregation, hearing this, look worried.

In the second panel, the preacher gets into the pulpit and says, "Now, I'm going to tell you why he didn't actually mean that."

The cartoon congregation look relieved.

The tough sayings of Jesus – and this morning, we have some tough ones – tend to have this effect. If your right hand causes you to sin...well, folks, show me the hand, and the axe you used on it that saved the rest of your body from its evil. If your right eye...well, folks, lemme see that vile jelly plucked out, it being better to go into heaven blind or maimed than with one's full, if sinful, equipment to take a fast train to the hot place. What, none of you? Oh, come on. Be honest. I'm warning you. I've heard your confessions....

Okay, okay. Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone, or pluck the first eye – but, come on. He doesn't mean all this, surely. Not literally. No-one in his right mind would ever –

Ask me later to tell you the story of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century biblical scholar and theologian Origen, one of our finest, but who, fearful of sin and mortified by what he felt was his tendency to it, one day cut off his –

Yeah. No more of that now. Ask me later.

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Surely, no-one in his right mind –

Enter the biblical scholars, eager as beavers to remind us that the verb in this passage is the Greek word for “stumble,” not “sin,” or (as the KJV has it) “offend,” and that Jesus is only talking about what one should do with key body parts that cause one so stumble. I’m not sure that helps. “Stumble,” after all, is the *le mot juste* he just used to say what it were better to have happen to any who caused one of these little ones to stumble, *viz.* by putting a stumbling block in the way. Is that even a thing? Or is it just a rock someone moves to be in the way, much as a small poodle we once owned kept moving itself into the path of my grandmother and her walker, all the better to trip her with, though I think in that case the little puppy just wanted to make friends and had no idea that its antics could cause break a leg or a hip. But yes: the road to the ER, like that to hell, can be paved with the best of intentions.

So might it be with any who took Jesus at his word in these passages. Origen aside, I’ve never known a biblical literalist who takes these particular commands *made by Jesus himself in his own words* as things to follow to the letter as the law. One can imagine how fast would uncouple the Bible Belt in this country and anywhere with one if preachers of that ilk gave out handaxes and ice picks when this passage was read and commanded their people to, in the name of God, do as they has just been told. That rather proves the point non-literalists have been making since the exile in Babylon, if not before, that faithfully reading these texts requires that we not take them literally, but as icons through which to see, rightly, the glory and the power, the mercy and the compassion of the Almighty whom we call, as it calls him, Love.

Yet Love, and blessed be His name, has rather an edge in this passage, set off by at least two things. The first was the mind-numbing stupidity of yet another disciple, this one having rebuked someone for casting out demons in Jesus’s name who hadn’t given that disciple the secret handshake or call sign that Jesus’s closest followers knew

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each other by. What went through mind of this particular child of God, so recently told that “The first shall be last, and the last be first?” “Sure, they’re helping,” might go the thought, “but what if they’re doing it wrong? How dare they use his power who meant it for us? How do we know we can trust them if all they’re doing is doing good to people we didn’t?” You can imagine Jesus, hearing this, and seeing in his mind’s eye the growth of a worldwide bureaucracy that would charge itself to stifle in his name every ounce of goodness and creativity, initiative and inspiration under the weight of its procedures and hierarchies and suspicions, only to open the door to let in far more demons than they ever cast out, once those demons learned how to evade their procedures, take over their hierarchies, and gaslight their suspicions. “By their fruits, ye shall know them” he would say elsewhere, and many a good soul with him, trusting that they would, in fact, know how to tell. Here, Jesus goes through it step by step, as with a child. “They can’t do good in my name and also do bad,” he says, “and won’t soon try.” If they really do good, that is – which is a given in the passage, since the complaining disciple’s whole complaint was that this person was actually casting out actual demons. If they’re doing actual good, that’s great. Why on earth would you want to stop them?

Second: he reminds them to avoid pre-judging people – to avoid prejudice, that is. “Whoever is not against us are for us,” he says. This is to remind them, and us, that unless someone has set their foot against love and compassion and all it means, they are not our enemy. Those who are apathetic or just unawares, too, are not foes – so don’t treat them as if they are. Respect them, and they will respect you. Judge them by their fruits, and they will repay you in tarts, pies, and candy canes all day long. People, please. Help me here. Play on my team. If people are casting out actual demons, don’t for the love of God try to get in their way.

This brings Jesus to the second thing that set him off, in this passage: there were actual demons to cast out, and he hadn't found them yet. "How many of these things are there?" he wondered "How will we ever get to them all – and this is just one little country, one irrelevant backwater between three powerful civilizations whom I, Jesus, am supposed to change how? and with what – tools like these? Thank God others are picking up the slack, as it were; I didn't even know there was this much slack to pick up – and my own don't even get it. They say it out loud and they don't get it. What is it actually going to take?"

What it took, at least as far as we can figure, is for him to repeat the lesson he shouted at Peter a couple weeks ago, "Get thee behind me, Satan!" That is, as the Marines put it: lead, follow, or get the hell out of the way.

"We need allies," I read Jesus as saying here "Anyone who helps us even a little – gives you a cup of cold water, for instance – is an ally, or close enough to one that even the dullest of you could help them decide to become one. But if you don't, if you cause them to stumble, sin, offend, or otherwise get in the way of their getting to me and getting right with me, I'd rather someone had drowned you in the lake over there on purpose, and took their sweet time doing so. Anything that gets in the way of spreading mercy and compassion, anything that gets in the way of the difference my Father and I want to make in this world, anything that drives people away from the Way of Love, has got to go. You, or any such part of you, that gets in the way, has to go. Yeah, it may be that your hand or your eye, your foot or your face or your very sense of who you are has got to go if you're going to be able to get this. I hope it doesn't come to that, but it might. Please understand that it actually might – but better that you lose part of yourself than we lose all of you."

It shocks, and it is meant to. That shock is part of its power – and part of Jesus's power is that you never know quite how much of it there is or how far it's going to

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take you. He is not, to use C.S. Lewis's metaphor for him, a tame lion, far from it. He is powerful and good – almighty, and full of compassion. Being full of compassion, being a person of pity and sympathy, has a corollary that people don't always expect: a righteous, slow-burning anger at the evils people do, a rage at human folly, an intolerance for stupidity or malevolence, an impatience with those less committed to healing the hurts of the world, and the ability and often necessity to be brutally honest until it works. "For he is like a refiner's fire," says one of the prophets, separating wheat from chaff and dross from gold, and never confused as to how they differ or what that difference means.

"For everyone will be salted with fire," says Jesus next, in his own take on how to convey the message of that refiner's fire, or fuller's soap, those things that purify and cleanse and preserve at once, often painfully, but also completely.

How? Well, salt hurts, as an abrasive, and especially when put into a wound. It can kill, if you have too much, but also preserve and (meat), by much the same action as it hurts flesh, and it can flavor our food. Fire hurts, and can kill, but also warm us, preserve us, shine light in any darkness, and both heat or destroy our homes. I do not know, and could not discover, what it would mean to be salted with fire, so found myself at the end of the passage, focusing on the word "peace." To keep peace requires preservation and purification enough. How can we "have salt in ourselves and be at peace with one another?"

This week we watched, in Texas, white men on horses rode down black men and women trying to get into this country and find a better life, having fled the hell that is Haiti and the purgatory of the road to a safer land. The white riders, as guardians of that land and expressions of its power, if perhaps not of its virtues, were doing all they could to stop them. Cameras caught them, but could not stop them, just as they caught the murderer of George Floyd in the act, but could not stop them. Those

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cameras did, however, bear witness, so that we might see and judge for ourselves, what the God who is Love would have us do about it.

Just after I wrote those lines, this week, I gathered with mourners, under tall trees and lowering clouds, as we prepared to lay to rest Janice Bell Wood, just outside, in the churchyard. They were silent, as those who grief so often are, and their eyes were full of tears. There was no church funeral, but simply a committal at the graveside. It is a short service. Hardly are people gathered before the words begin, and then end, with the remains of the decedent just where we put them, the earth upon them and the flowers, and the tears come. No cameras were there to catch them, but still nothing could stop the tears, nor would want to, until grief took its course and the mourners could depart, and the dead rest, in peace. It falls to me to bear witness to this, so that we might see (well, imagine) and judge for ourselves, what the God who is Love would have us do about this scene, too.

People are often in need, in terror, in grief, or in fear. One does not always know what to do to help. Sometimes one can do much. Sometimes one can do little. When the rains finally came on Wednesday, after the funeral, I could not stop them and would not have wished to. But I could, and did, open the doors of the church to let in those seeking shelter from the rain. I could even give those who wanted one a cup of cold water, for which they were grateful. We laughed a little about how much Ms. Wood would've loved that rain, because of all that it makes grow. As the last of them left, I wished that the church could've done more. We would have, had they sought it. Yet I was glad for what we did do, and that there is always more to do – more cups of water to hand out to those who thirst, more shelter to offer from life's real and metaphorical storms. So I ended the day in prayer, "Lord, show me how. Salt me with fire if you have to, but show me how." *Amen.*