

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
I SAMUEL 17:(1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49
PSALM 9:9-20
II CORINTHIANS 6:1-13
MARK 4:35-41
June 23, 2024

A Reason to Offend!

As many of you may remember, a few short months ago we, our church, was targeted by a couple, two drive-by photographers in a pickup truck who took pictures of me and our lovely, but fading, soon to be replaced, rainbow banner. Bad memory! As they merrily sped away after snapping their illicit photos, the photographer screamed at me “Shame on you!”, the angry woman’s neck veins bulging in what surely was not a healthy response. Basically, our church, we, you and me, had offended her greatly and she was self-righteously letting me know it. My hunch is, I would be willing to bet that this couple never thought they would be a part of a sermon. But to misuse a Carly Simon song, this sermon is not about them, at least not directly! A preacher friend of mine once said, “Ain’t no high like a self-righteous high!” Oh, how very true! The apostle Paul in our epistle lection for today says to the church at Corinth, “We do not give anyone any reason to be offended about anything so that our ministry will not be criticized.” In the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) this translation has the former Pharisee saying, “We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry. . .” And finally, Mitzi Minor, one of my fellow seminarians from back in the day, translates this verse thusly, “We are giving no one any occasion for misstepping so that the ministry may not be blamed, but in everything [we are] commending ourselves as servants of God.”¹

The difficulty in interpreting this specific verse is that while there are numerous translations offering nuanced meanings of the Greek, there is not much commentary about it. In that regard it gives me a lot of license, a lot of leeway this morning! Taken at face value, Paul’s musings, at least at this point, quickly create a conundrum for those of us who read his words more than two thousand years after the fact, long after they were written. Is what Paul wrote long ago meant to serve as a paradigm, an exacting template for us to follow an expectation as unreasonable as it obviously now is in our

¹Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing Inc., 2009), 122.

highly volatile ecclesial and societal settings? After all, his writings have long been regarded as ancient words, and like with all the biblical narrative, are timebound and timeless in their content. They are not, however, in any way relegated to the dustbin of history, still speaking a relevant word to the Church, to all of us. **Paul's subtle recommendation about the risk of becoming offensive while trying not to offend reminds me of the adage, "rock the boat but don't make waves," or as was posted on the lawns of Southern Seminary back in the day, "walk on the grass but don't make paths!" Good luck with any of that! Are we really expected to believe that the apostle Paul of all people never offended anyone with his words and actions? Really! Seriously! A fair question that can, and probably should, be raised is, "was the apostle being sarcastic, was this a serious admonition?" What immediately follows strongly suggests that perhaps this was so, that Paul employed sarcasm, or at least irony, one commentator suggests "mockery", that maybe Paul was attempting to show how ludicrous it would be to vainly attempt to not offend anyone with what was a fresh and new, having only recently emerged and still emerging, yes, freshly minted, religious expression, skepticism abounding by all parties everywhere it was introduced. Christianity, originally known by its adherents as "followers of the way", had only recently made its debut as part of the regional religious scene. It has been suggested by some scholars that Paul used sarcasm as a literary medium to make his points in certain places in his letters.²**

Perhaps being less offensive was somewhat easier back in Paul's day, the apostle having started these fledgling churches and thus there were no competing narratives on the radar. Evidently, there was one church at Corinth and Paul was its only spokesperson, the only one providing content, giving this church and the Church apostolic, catholic, and universal the dogmatic and doctrinal substance that would come to define and dictate in the creeds. Oh, how easy that must have made church life. Paul said it! They believed it! That settled it! There was no need for dissent, no room for counter narratives, contrary opinions. After all, who could argue with Paul? It would have been like the disciples arguing with Jesus! While they frequently argued among themselves, they would never deign to argue with their rabbi, oh, except on the rare occasion that Peter chose to verbally spar with his master. But I digress; I often do! It is a rather simple equation. The less voices, the less diversity, the less friction, the less disagreement, and thus the more homogenous, the more agreement, the more lockstep as lemmings, the more unity. That may have been then, once upon a time, but this is surely now! Throughout its glorious and sordid history the Church has often multiplied

²See Matthew Pawlak, *Sarcasm in Paul's Letters* in Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 182

by division, splitting into splinters over important and essential, inane and irrelevant, issues, schism the unfortunate way into the future. **It goes without saying but then it must be said that life in the here and now is vastly, very different! Yes, variety may be the spice of life, but it is always simpler, albeit a whole lot more boring, when there is only one brand, one opinion, one voice, one narrative, when dissenting viewpoints are avoided or ignored, suppressed or squelched, altogether. Yes, we have seen this dynamic at every level in our contemporary setting. Sad, but true! Our world, including our churchly world, including every mutation, every stripe, manifest today, is radically different than it was for our first, second, third, and fourth century forebears, even as they became evermore diverse after their inception, developing and evolving as they went.** The Church today is an eclectic assortment of every liturgical, sectarian, and locally governed manifestation imaginable, a veritable cornucopia of variety and unique expression. Finding agreement is not only difficult, but seems almost impossible, common ground truly a thing of the past, a dinosaur, a relic, if it ever existed in the first place. Offending one another as individual Christians, as churches, and as denominations is now commonplace, the order of the day, the expectation that is the rule and not the exception. **Reading Paul's always needed words, what then shall we do, how shall we proceed, how do we maintain our integrity, remain true to self and our convictions, maintaining authenticity, being genuine in every way possible, while sharing our story, our beliefs, our faith, staying steadfast to ourselves and our cause, giving voice to our witness, proving the pudding of our testimony? As Nancy D. duly noted, to be true to who we are like Quincy (the dog) or Jesus! Yes, how do we do that? If our goal is to always get along, to never upset or offend, to never be accused of being at fault in any way whatsoever, then we must simply fade into the background, the only option left committing the sin painfully and judgmentally describing the church at Laodicea in the book of Revelation, that local congregation becoming lukewarm to the degree that God would spew them out of the mouth of the Holy One, an expectoration of divine magnitude. I have always wanted to get "expectorate" into a sermon! That is no option at all! In other words, our options are not just limited, there really are none if we are going to candidly express our understanding of the gospel forthrightly and honestly as we believe it to be, as we perceive it as led by the Spirit, if we are going to follow Jesus in the way we believe he would have us go!**

As part of Paul's reflections about being offensive, of the possibility of offending someone, Paul reminds his readers of the pathway that has led to this moment in time, this point along the journey. He offers a litany of commendations, events and attributes,

surely both personal and corporate in nature, all of which served to steel these early believers in their processes of discovery and faithful discernment. Paul presents a long laundry list, almost exhausting to read. Paul describes the great endurance, the afflictions, the hardships, the calamities, the beatings, the imprisonments, the riots, the labors, the sleepless nights, and finally, yes, the hunger, no doubt more than mere physical, but emotional and spiritual. It is as if he is saying that he and his colleagues in ministry who were wonderfully aiding and abetting have earned the right, are entitled to offend, that offense is warranted if that should be the result. He then balances all these negative images with a host of positive images, call them blessings, naming purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the very power of God, each of these lifting the spirits, enlivening the souls, giving them a boost, strength for all their arduous tasks, the dangerous journeys to come, the potential for extreme punishment they might face, including persecution and torture, and even death as martyrs, martyrdom the ultimate source of faithful pride. Paul describes all these, what we who have worked in the retail industry called features and benefits, as the weapons of righteousness for the right and left hand. Paul then adds, “In honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute! We are treated as impostors and yet are true, as unknown and yet are well known, as dying and look—we are alive, as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything. We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians! Our heart is wide open to you! There is no restriction in our affections but only in yours! In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also!” It seems as if Paul is contradicting his previous comments, acknowledging that some, perhaps many, sadly, maybe everyone, was going to be offended, appalled at some or all, finding fault with the minor and the major. Intentionally so, we would ask? Sometimes mistakes are made, mea culpa, while sometimes what we do, will by design, make someone unhappy and angry and sometimes all at the same time. This reality is always inherent in the risk of engagement with others! Paul had learned this from both sides of the aisle, knowing it and experiencing it firsthand. Many of us have had the same experiences!

As usual, perhaps and probably, the best answers to our inquiries are found in Jesus, our guide and friend, brother and mentor, even more so than Paul, not pitting one against the other, Paul often the literary tail that wags the gospel dog. As minor astutely reminds us, “Paul was not writing abstract theology but a letter to a first-century community of believers with whom he was in conflict.”³ Paul was the ultimate triage attendant, attending to whatever constituted the immediate crisis de jour, the

³Ibid., 119.

need presenting itself at the time. The question before us that we must always raise when reading any writer of what became Bible, is does the material resonate, does it seamlessly blend, parallel, with the life, ministry and mission of Jesus, his teaching and preaching? In other words, does Paul always jive with Jesus? Of course, we must remember that Jesus, to our knowledge wrote nothing, giving Paul more than a slight edge, an upper hand, when he began to craft what became theological treatises. We only know the story of Jesus, we only know of his good works, his preaching and teaching, based on his wonderfully biased biographers. We have no autobiographical information, no material whatsoever! For centuries, the Church has done its best to clean up Jesus, to purify or sanitize, the rabbi, removing any and all rough edges that were surely a part of the personality of this peasant reformer who came from the humblest, the most common, of family origins. Jesus was a tradesman, a carpenter as a carpenter's son, if you choose to ignore, remove the whole parental God thing from his biography! Some scholars now support the idea that he was not a learned rabbi but was at most "artisan literate." The question we must answer when reading Paul's suggestion that we never offend when sharing and living this thing we call gospel is that "Did Jesus ever offend anyone?" We all quickly know the answer. Of course, he did and did so frequently and on purpose, very intentionally. He was controversial because he was political, despite opinions to the contrary. In fact, the question we must always ask in terms of any of the literary offerings composed by Paul, the very creative former Pharisee and then current apostle is, "Is this what Jesus would have said if he had ever had the cause or the opportunity to sit down and write some words?" It is something that I had never considered until I began writing this sermon and I believe it to be a serious consideration to ponder. The quick and traditional answer is that there would never be any difference, not the slightest disagreement between Paul and Jesus. I am not so sure about that, that long and tense conversation best left for another day, way beyond the scope of a sermon, including this homiletical offering.

Knowing that Jesus could be offensive, that he was willing to offend all comers, persons of every stripe, but especially those possessing authority and power, gifted with privilege and prestige, when necessary, I think, gives us license, absolute permission, free range in our being and our doing. In the fractiously toxic climate in which we live and move and have our being today there is no way that any of us, that includes those on the right and the left, leftward and rightward leaning, can help but offending, making angry those who do not share specific viewpoints, no matter what those thoughts and ideas, those opinions, may be. Not only do we disagree, but we

disagree vehemently on a variety of theological, political, and social issues. That fact is not going to change! Our competing messages are indeed insulting and offensive, heresy, to those who believe a far different, even an opposite, i.e., opposing, interpretation of the gospel, of this religious expression we call Christianity. And so, we cast our bread upon the water, living the life according to the gospel as best as we know how, as best that we understand it, hoping and praying as we walk by faith and not by sight that grace, the grace of God, will guide us. It is a matter of trust, something the disciples, as we read in the storm story today, had to learn at the most basic level, the goal being to find ways, the capacity, to leach fear and anxiety out of their faithful and faithless lives. Yes, just like us, mirror images! These dynamics are especially difficult when we are engaged, having conversations, discourse and dialogue, and yes, debate, with neighbors, friends and family, loved ones who are closest to us. The best that any of us can do is to never take the bait and become argumentative despite our passion, reduced to being disagreeable rather than merely disagreeing. The challenge is to always seek to be as Christlike as possible as we can be in a given moment, under any circumstance and in any situation, all the scenarios that reveal themselves in surprising, unexpected, serendipitous encounters, real-time moments. The bottom line is that we will inevitably offend someone! That cannot be helped! But, even so, who knows? On occasion, perhaps the rarest occasion, we will make a dent and a difference, perhaps influencing someone to at least appreciate our perspective. And who knows? Maybe we will even make a discovery, glean a point or two from their thoughts and ideas in the process. Common ground seems impossible, but it is never too late, never too late. May in the large expanse of Christendom we find at least a modicum of commonality, knowing the world has more need than we could even begin to address in one sermon! May God grant us peace for the journey! Godspeed!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, a holy parent whose one and only offended a few folks along the way! Amen and amen!