

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
JOB 23:1-9, 16-17
PSALM 22:1-15
HEBREWS 4:12-16
MARK 10:17-31
October 13, 2024

Eyeing the Needle!

A two-edged sword! A two-edged sword is a graphic image that in our contemporary vernacular has come to mean something that is both good news, bad news, illustrating that which is helpful and damaging, in some cases, saving and damning. A “two-edged sword” has become such a familiar, perhaps popular expression, that most people forget, or never knew for that matter, that like many things we say in our common speak, a “two-edged sword” is a phrase taken directly from the Bible, that indeed, is derived from biblical foundations, rooted in this book often referred to as “holy”. No, “The Lord helps those who help themselves” and “God will not put more on you than you can handle,”, believe it or not, are not in there! These thought-provoking musings about the “two-edged sword” of scripture, this idea raised by the anonymous epistle writer of the book of Hebrews, a theologically inclined thinker who composed this letter to those who were steeped in the rich tradition of the Jewish faith, these highly charged words are a constant, a strong, and not so necessarily good, reminder of the militaristic imagery that surrounded both traditional Jews and Jewish and gentile converts to Christ because of the toxic environment in which they all lived. These warring, warrior, images sadly and unfortunately saturated the scriptural soil, leeching into every layer of the texts, deeply penetrating the groundwater of the Christian part of the Bible. “Sharper than a two-edged sword!” Always remember, the Christian scriptures were written during the height of what was a very volatile, an extremely violent, period in this land that became known as, is now called holy, a land characterized by, dominated back in the day by, an unfortunate and brutal, an oft ugly, history. It is a history down through the centuries that continues to repeat itself, a history from which we human beings have learned oh so little, that has taught humanity next to absolutely nothing, the proof of the proverbial pudding unfolding and revealed in real time in the ongoing conflicts, oppression, and incessant outright war that has for centuries overwhelmed humanity at every level.

The Bible, from cover-to-cover, is filled with battles describing skirmishes and outright major conflagrations from Jericho to Roman occupation, both the Hebrew and Christian

scriptures drips with the blood of the guilty and the innocent, permanently staining conquering perpetrators and random, collateral, victims alike, conquest always a dominate theme in scripture. The biblical narrative is filled with warring images, metaphors, that while, especially articulated in the Christian tradition, were meant for good, to be positive symbols, each and every warring word has left a legacy of violence and a victory-at-all-costs mentality that has always been the exact opposite, a radically diametrical polarity, against the peace-loving ways, the peaceful purposes, of Jesus, a peacenik of a man who after his death was unfairly shackled with battle-weary biblical images not of his own making, not of his own voice. And yet here we are, left to defend, to interpret and understand, this negative language, demonic to such a massive degree, a vitriolic vocabulary, a violent vernacular, that continues to feed our maddening bloodthirsty warring ways, so many wars fought in the name of God, pretending to defend God's honor, God's divine will. More than nuance, more than semantics, these are the words we have been given, yes, our linguistic legacy, a heritage from which we cannot run, deny, or escape, a tradition we must decipher for ourselves while never embracing. Yes, it is a highwire, a tightrope, on which we balance our belief and our faith as persons who seek to follow Christ, as we continue to give witness, proclaiming the message, the mission and ministry, shared by Jesus in his preaching and teaching, as people who still find value, despite much negativity to the contrary, to honor Christianity as Christian people still somehow proud to wear this label, own this brand.

It was only natural that the writer of Hebrews would boldly and unequivocally declare to this audience steeped in Judaism the veracity of scripture, reverencing the biblical narrative that at the time was understood to consist of the totality of the Hebrew Bible alone. None of the Christian writings being circulated and read back in the day, texts we now gladly enjoy and study and regard as sacred, at least to some degree, were even for a nanosecond thought to be even remotely level, on par with holy writ. In no way were these texts presumed to have the same value, the equivalent of what we traditionally call the Old Testament, despite how coveted, how cherished, those invaluable essential writings we traditionally call the New Testament were . . . and are. The Hebrew Bible was the only Bible for both Jews and Jewish converts first described as "followers of the way" of Jesus. The Torah, holding the law, the prophets and the judges, the eloquently poetic wisdom literature, all of it was revered, believed to be inspired as sacred word of God, whatever inspiration meant to those faithful folks once upon a time. "Sharper than a two-edged sword!" And speaking of the biblical definition of inspiration, the Bible, at least in one citation, found in the anonymous letter writer to Timothy, once again, speaking of the only Bible he knew, the Hebrew Bible declared with the utmost clarity, that "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for

training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Of course, this writer had come to believe, erroneously so I think, that all the Hebrew Bible was precursor, prologue, predicting the coming of Jesus into the world, something theologians call supersessionism. Never a good thing, an insult to the ancient story! This writer declares, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Arguments about literalism, including the inane defense proclaimed by Bible-thumping inerrantists, or those trafficking in mind-numbing infallibility about biblical content, every jot and tittle, never appearing on the radar of those who first, and following, read, because those kinds of conversations would have been strange, bizarre indeed, all rendered as irrelevant, the beauty and trustworthiness of scripture always transcending the moment, the real time circumstances and situations that spawned, yes, inspired, those who creatively wrote, the poetic wisdom saturating so many beautifully crafted and thoughtful phrases. **The creative writer of the book of Hebrews, forever unnamed, unknown in perpetuity, offered a stark, a vivid, reminder to those faithful but always threatened, potentially persecuted readers, as they strived to maintain their faith, delightfully convicted by this newly minted faith they had discovered and embraced, that indeed, “the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow!” According to this intuitive writer, the word of God “. . . is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the One to whom we must render an account!” Yikes! The graphic depiction in these sobering words is not lost on any of us. “Sharper than a two-edged sword!” I am reminded of the creation story written by the Yahwist, who declares in Genesis, describing the human couple in their created state as “naked and not ashamed!” I sense that this gifted epistle writer was saying the exact opposite about the human predicament, unfortunately, describing perfectly our state of affairs, that at least on more than many occasions, reminding all of us that God sees us in our birthday suits every day, all the time. Now, there is an image to behold and take with you this morning! The Bible said it! I believe it! That settles it! And indeed, the good book often leaves us “laid bare” to use a not-so-subtle image by this profound letter writer. **Indeed, these somewhat stunning, and perhaps convicting, words found here in the book of Hebrews, set us up perfectly for the transparently crafted words we read in the Gospel of Mark this morning, sudden sermonically intended!****

The Markan writer tells us that an unnamed and unknown man, anonymity apparently an evolving theme here, had just set out on an unknown journey, a metaphorical symbol on

steroids if there ever was one, approached Jesus with a question, raising a question for the ages, “Good Teacher,” a comment that the humble and always self-deprecating rabbi did not receive well, always deflecting, deferring to his God, God alone good, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” It is the same question a lawyer once asked Jesus, a conversation preceding Jesus’ eloquent answer in the parable called “The Good Samaritan.” Jesus answers the inquiry raised today by giving the usual litany, reciting the typical laundry list of the law, citing several of the big ten, the commandments that is! The lawyer, on the other hand, according to Luke, seeking to test, to trap, Jesus, conversed with the rabbi about love of neighbor, also a worthy goal indeed. The unnamed and unknown man in the story we read today, in what was a most honest and sincere dialogue, was thoughtfully engaged by Jesus about obedience to the Decalogue, keeping the ten commandments, another worthwhile objective. Both gentlemen were on the right track, one certainly sincere, while the other not so much. Good answers! Well played! You get to stay out of the doghouse! So far, so good! This man, who is barely described in Mark, has kept all these rules and regulations from the time of his youth, so he claims. He assures Jesus that he has stayed on the right track, no stumbles, no trip-ups, yet! Think of this man as anyone, as any man, as any woman. Think of this man as you or me. Imagine that it is one of us asking such a sobering and potentially disturbing question of Jesus, the man from Nazareth known as teacher, as rabbi. Yes, it is this kind of reflection that brings any aspiring depth of theological inquiry close to home, hitting as close to home as we can get. Whenever we subliminally choose to make a biblical story about someone else, presuming the text to be about an other, spell check always insists on “another”, you choose, not about us, failing to put ourselves in the story as if we are discussing a hypothetical individual, we have missed the point from the get-go because we can benignly, though naively, pretend that the story, in this case, this story, does not apply to us!

Unfortunately, we know the way this story ends, no happily ever after a part of the narrative. Jesus was so moved, so impressed, with the apparent humility, the transparency, the sincerity of this individual, claiming on the spot to love him, a phrase Jesus uses nowhere else, a special designation indeed, Jesus, with no further vetting, unilaterally invited this man to join his inner circle, to become a disciple, yes, the lucky thirteenth, no conferring with the twelve, no seeking their opinion, unsolicited as it would have been. But unlike the wonder of a fairy tale the story does not have a happy ending, all does not end well, the man owning too much, burdened with too many possessions, unable to let go and embrace what would have been a radically life-altering, a very different kind of life. Sadly, Mark tells us that the man went away from them grieving, knowing in his heart and mind that he was about to miss a great, no, the greatest, opportunity, the chance of a lifetime. Jesus, no doubt overwhelmed with

sadness as well, then makes either an intentionally pointed, or perhaps an offhand, passing, comment, stunning in every way, a comment that haunts all of us who live with layer upon layer of affluence, who are burdened with wealth, all our accumulations, all our many possessions, Jesus stoically declaring how difficult it is to attain eternal life, yes, even easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Oh, how we hope, how we wish, this might be an exaggeration, hyperbole on steroids! This line is not a “two-edged sword,” but is a dagger, a dagger thrust through the heart of the American dream! No matter the interpretation of that oft debated verse, getting a camel through a small space, no matter the literal or hyperbole, obviously ain’t an easy thing to do, an achievement far beyond our reach, but certainly not beyond, never beyond, the reach of God. This text does not tell everyone to give away everything that they own, all that they have. I believe it was case specific! We tend to make every biblical story, everything we read in the Bible, as generally, universally, applicable to everyone, all the time, always general and never case specific. If this is not so, not the case, then we are all in trouble, for we are all this man, living with his predicament, meaning thusly that we too can never follow Jesus! Say it ain’t so! Yet, even with this textual nuance being acknowledged, despite that caveat, as dangerous as my assumption might be, this text remains valid, a stark reminder about priorities, about ultimate value, about our highest aspirations, about where we find our treasure, to use a biblical, Gospel, image.

This Markan text is a reminder about the ongoing high calling to every individual to meet the demands of achieving the common good of humanity, about what it means to be human, yes, about human being. Part of that inherent call is to find the capacity to live out of a mindset of abundant generosity, not scarcity, yes, to “share earthly and spiritual resources” as the banner we have adopted proclaims. The disciples, Jesus reassuring them by calling them children, perhaps because he had just been in the midst of children, his closest confidants were disturbed, apparently shocked, evidently even frightened, by this high stakes interaction between Jesus and this about to be traveling man, the conversation taking what for the twelve was a horrifically negative turn, a dark alley leading to what was surely a dreadful dead end, perhaps beyond the edge of an unending abyss. Exasperated, they reminded Jesus, as if he needed the reminder, that they had given up everything, done the opposite of this man, despite the fact they really did not have nearly as much to relinquish. Even so, they had abandoned career and family, becoming totally dependent on their teacher, mentor, brother, and friend for their sustenance, their very survival. For the disciples on this day, in this wild encounter, this frank engagement, made for another, one among many, teachable moments. Every day, we are presented with teachable moments, challenges and opportunities, yes, many obstacles, many impediments, forks in the road that call for decisions. Perhaps tinged with a touch or more of irony, this is one of the blessings, not the bane, of our earthly

existence, this blessed and precious life we have been given, this grandest adventure we have been granted. Not only are we to make the best of this life and living, but we are to make the most of this life and living, and making the most of life and living always includes, if it is not dominated, by the giving of ourselves, knowing that in so doing, we become the better, growing, evolving, maturing, yes, becoming more human, becoming the best we were created to be, perhaps including just a little bit of faith in the process. Over the next few weeks we will be given subtle and stark reminders of the essence of stewardship, what it means to share in every way that this Christian life calls us to share, and yes, what it means to be a part of a community, a beloved, vibrant and vital, relational and relevant, faith community, a fellowship in which all of us are wonderfully enmeshed, interconnected in so many ways, responsible and accountable to one another. Yes, we have heard it all before, nothing new here, but perhaps, just maybe, at least for this year, for this one season, this sacred season, that we hear all these words, not as blather, as blah, blah, blah, same old, same old, but that we hear them in fresh and new ways, that we joyfully write them on our hearts, and minds, and that we make them a part of our journey, traveling in a far different direction, heading for a much different place, than wherever it was the sad man described in Mark wound up going on his journey despite his brief but enlightening encounter and interaction with Jesus. After all, when we meet Jesus, it should take us in the right, not the wrong, direction, opening to us a vast new world, all filled with glorious possibility and potential each and every precious step of the way, every step following in the wondrous steps of Jesus. How could he have turned down that amazing offer? May we not be so foolish, so reluctant to seize the moment! May we not make that same, that huge, mistake! Jesus' invitation is always open!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and delivers a word claimed to be a "sharper than a two-edged sword," reminding us that grace is free and costs us everything we have! Amen and amen!