

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
James 5:13-20, Psalm 124, Mark 9:38-40
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There would have been a time in this country when a visit from the head of the Roman Catholic Church would have been met with scorn by many non-Catholic Christians. Thank God that is no longer true as respect for different expressions of Christian faith is much more widespread today. We no longer act like John in today's gospel when he and other disciples try to stop someone they don't know from performing an exorcism in Jesus' name. Jesus himself is very generous and inclusive when he says, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Whereas the human inclination is to close ranks, check picture ID's and restrict membership, at least here Jesus wants to widen the circle and give people the benefit of the doubt.

Church growth experts would say that belonging should precede believing if we want to make new Christians. In other words, inviting, welcoming and including new persons into our church families is priority one. If they are truly accepted, there will be plenty of time later on for them to learn what we believe as Episcopalians or Lutherans or Baptists. The first thing we all want to learn and experience is that we are loved by God. The "hospitality" in our mission statement is our goal to offer that love first and foremost.

I heard the most wonderful compliment about Pope Francis from the Roman Catholic chaplain to our House of Representatives in Washington. He said everyone who meets the Pope responds by saying he makes them want to be a better person. One woman even said the Pope made her want to be a better Jew.

I can only think that having that sort of charisma or genuine, winning persona is what Jesus means when he says that we all are to have salt in ourselves, and be at peace with one another. Salt here may mean a faith that exudes warmth and sincere regard for everyone we meet. Sometimes that means offering as little as cup of cold water or whatever basic provision we have.

Our church provided a basic provision of shelter for a man the other night. When I arrived early Thursday morning for Bible study, I noticed an occupied sleeping bag curled up on the concrete slab of the pavilion. After the class, the bag was still there, and I walked down to see what I could do for the occupant. By now, B-man, as he called himself when I introduced myself, was sitting on the lower parking lot steps smoking a cigarette. I was very friendly and offered him some coffee, which he said he didn't drink. He told me he was well educated and didn't need food or money or anything from me. What a pleasant surprise. He was passing out papers that advertised a pawn shop on South Sycamore Street. I told him I'd put one on the bulletin board

in the church, and that I might bring something for the pawn shop to sell. He was most appreciative. We departed friends, and I would honestly enjoy seeing him again. All Jesus asks is that we try a little kindness with everyone.

Yogi Berra, a great baseball player for the New York Yankees, died last week. You probably know that he was well known for his many Yogi-isms, such as “When you get to a fork in the road, take it.” Or “Pair up in threes.” Or my favorite: “It’s déjà vu all over again.” One of Yogi’s less well known sayings is, “All pitchers are liars or crybabies.” Yogi was a catcher. Of course, we know that all pitchers are not liars or crybabies. In this case, we could say Yogi was exaggerating.

The author of the Paul Bunyan folklore used extreme exaggeration or what is also called hyperbole in one legend which reads, “Well now, one winter it was so cold that all the geese flew backward and all the fish moved south... Late at night, it got so frigid that all spoken words froze solid before they could be heard. People had to wait until sunup to find out what folks were talking about the night before.”

Much earlier, Jesus himself demonstrated the literary art of hyperbole when he wrote about millstones hung around necks, plucking out eyes and amputating limbs. Flannery O’Connor, a Christian writer of fiction, once said, “I use the grotesque the way I do because people are deaf and dumb and need help to see and hear.”

Jesus resorts to the grotesque in Mark’s chapter 9 to get his rather dense disciples to see and hear. Maybe we fall into that category as well.

When he says that we should be upright examples to those new in the faith, he uses strong metaphorical language. If our behavior or speech causes a recent convert to falter, we’re liable to be fitted with “cement shoes” and dropped into the Hudson River.

If our right hand gets caught in the cookie jar before dinner, or our left hand takes something of much more value that doesn’t belong to us, we’ve removed our hand from that of our God – a great loss.

If we have kicked a problem down the road or knowingly taken the wrong fork in the road, we have stepped off the holy way and the path of the righteous.

A lazy eye is a physical condition. A wandering eye is a moral and spiritual condition which needs to be reined in before the whole body crashes and burns due to a greater mishap.

In other words, Jesus takes our sins seriously and asks us to amputate all bad habits, cut loose long-held resentments and abandon immoral ambitions and intentions.

It is ironic that while here Jesus figuratively talks about disfiguring ourselves to eradicate our sins, in the end, he allows himself to be wounded, pierced, gored and killed to remove our sins for us.

Every Sunday, in the prayers before communion, we are reminded of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. Every Sunday, therefore, we should be once again ready to forsake our sins with prayer and confession, as James writes, because we are loved in spite of our failings and fallings.

Some don't think God sends us to hell as much as we get there on our own in this life and the next. A wise man once said, "Heaven and hell are simply continuations of what we choose, love and live here and now."

So always choose love, mercy and gratitude and to extend the hand of friendship. AMEN.