

“Mixed Messages”

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost - 8.29.21 - Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23/B

In our Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy today, we hear about the end of the Israelites' wanderings, and the entry into the Promised Land. Moses, just like loving parents sending kids off to a school where they cannot go as well, sends the Israelites off on their new adventure just as many of you did these past few weeks - with reminders of *who they are*, and how they should act. “Don't forget what I've taught you! Be yourself! Remember who you are!” Perhaps you were one of those “senders”.

But how do we prepare ourselves and our children to live a good life? How do we keep them from bad behavior, or worse yet, bad decisions? To what rules and norms can we point which will help them be *righteous* - literally “right with God?” For the people of Israel, observing the Law of Moses was “living proof” of their identity, and they had been well prepared to live that way - taught for generations to appreciate their life as it was ordered by The Ten Commandments. This was Moses' Law, the Torah, and it was part of who they were. But as we return to readings from Mark's Gospel today, we find the Jews' tradition of living under the Law getting a bit threadbare.

Jesus was discussing some “curriculum updates” with other teachers - Pharisees (laymen, interpreters) and scribes (lawyers) who were bound by the traditions of the elders as well as the purity codes in Leviticus. So, they questioned Jesus' disciples, who were not playing by the customary rules - not keeping the rituals, as in the washing of the hands before meals. (Now in this day of coronavirus, we might just side with the Pharisees; so wash your hands after worship!)

Now, no one likes to be told they are wrong. Even more so, no one likes to be told they are unworthy. And yet, in a sometimes overzealous attempt to instill righteousness, the church has done considerable damage over the centuries. I mean, how is a youngster to receive the a clear picture of God when they hear these two statements from the same source: “*All your righteousness is as filthy rags...*” and “*Let the children come to me, for as such is the Kingdom of God.*” **Mixed messages.** Are we beloved of the Father of heavenly lights (as James calls God in our 2nd lesson today) or are we “*Poor, miserable sinners...?*” Quick answer? Yes. As Luther said, we are at the same time saint and sinner. So, how exactly does that work?

First let's be clear about the presence and the effect of sin. Most of us would describe sin as actions that are wrong, or unethical or just plain evil. That is a category I would call “sin with a little ‘s.’” These are the transgressions that we DO. In contrast, “Sin with a capital ‘S’ is more like DNA - it's part of us, part of how we are hardwired. Again, brother Luther helps us out with his classic definition, “Sin is the heart turned in on itself.” I have found this distinction to be helpful along the way: we sin with a little “s” by things we DO; but we are sinful with a big “S” in our very being. Thus, our corporate confession begins: “*Most merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves...*” Because of Sin with a capital S, we seem incapable of **not** committing sins with a little s.

At this point, some of you might be thinking the age-old excuse: “*Hey, I'm a good person. I do a lot of good work and I try not to hurt anyone intentionally!*” And that would be mostly true of all of us. So, here is one way to illustrate for yourself your sinful nature (just in case you need an example.) Answer this: what makes me angry? What kinds of situations frustrate and exasperate and just plain tick me off? Think about that for a moment. I'll wait.

If the mere thought of some of your examples makes your blood rise - welcome to the human race - where more often than not - anger is the hallmark of the effect of our sinful nature. And Anger can mask a thousand different emotions from fear, to hurt, to disappointment, to ...

Anger is the presence of a situation (from our unique perspectives) which should be something else. You have a point of view that others should share. And you cannot understand why they don't. Anger. You want someone to behave differently and cannot make them do so, no matter how hard you try. Anger. You disagree with people's choices or causes, and the gap cannot be bridged. Anger. Now, I'm sure there are as many definitions of anger as there are people. But Pastor Dalton Rushing sums it up in one phrase: anger often happens "when **what is** does not line up with **what ought to be.**" *Mixed messages.*

These things may be small, even silly. But sometimes they are much bigger, much more difficult. When churches exclude people made in God's image, as if it were our job. When people do the best they can but never seem to be able to get ahead; When society expects you to move on quickly from grief, as if such a thing were possible; When racism, or sexism, or homophobia, or ageism run rampant; when bullies flourish; when hypocrisy reigns; when the widow and the orphan are left to fend for themselves, well, we can all understand the anger. I mean, good grief, it makes *me* angry, and I'm rarely on the receiving end of this injustice. But, I think it's **supposed** to make us angry. Why? In each of these examples, **What is** does not line up with **what ought to be.** So how do we deal with the anger that has been festering all around us for the last few years? The Letter of James says clearly that everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry, but please note that he does not say that you should never **be angry.**

Indeed, there is what we call "righteous indignation." That's what Jesus was feeling when he turned over the tables in the Temple - pointing out that the merchants had taken advantage of the needs of those coming to worship God in the ways that had been practiced for generations. "*My Temple should be a house of prayer! But you have made it a den of thieves!*" But be careful. There are only a handful of those who are in a position to rightfully display that kind of anger. I mean, imagine if it had been Thomas or Philip who marched into the courtyard and started driving people out with a whip of cords! Not their place on that particular day...

No. I'm talking about the anger that seeps into our relationships and chips away at the other. I'm talking about the positions that we hold that have become so imbedded in us that we stop listening. I'm talking about the anger that comes when we judge someone else's life on our terms, and can't even imagine that there might be another valid experience.

Just the other day, I read about what happens to certain trees in the midst of wildfires. The fire begins at the roots, and in some species the fire burns the tree from the inside, such that you can't tell much is wrong with the tree until you take a whack at it, and you see the flames licking out from within. Dealing with anger is very much like dealing with fire in this way. If you aren't careful, it will burn you up from the inside.

Be slow to grow angry, but be angry about the right things. Being inconvenienced is not the same thing as being marginalized. In fact, much of the message of the entire Bible is that we are to look out for one another, to do as Jesus said in the two greatest commandments, to love God and to love others. Seems that a big part of loving others is to find the place where *what is* does not line up with *what ought to be*, and then try our best to unmix the messages without harming the messenger.

You know, God observed human sinfulness for generations - sending teachers and prophets and signs and wonders to try to turn the heads of the created ones - stiff-necked and stubborn -

those overly concerned about their rights and themselves. So, God took a dramatic risk, which I think is illustrated in this story told by a colleague:

Several years ago, I recall taking our dog out before going to bed. As I was waiting for her on our screened-in porch, I heard a flutter behind me. When I turned around, there perched on one of our patio chairs was a screech owl. Its big eyes were just staring at me. It was a beautiful creature. I wondered what it was doing on my porch. Soon it dawned on me that the poor thing couldn't find its way out.

So, the first thing I did was open the front porch door and point the way out as if the owl understood human behavior. The owl just kept looking at me with those big eyes. The next thing I did was walk outside the doors and try to wave the owl out, "Come on, come on!" The owl continued to stare at me. Then I remembered that the porch lights were not on, so I turned them on so he could see his way out, and the owl just stared at me. I finally gave up.

As I was walking up the stairs to bed, I thought, "The only way I could free that owl and bring it home is to become an owl myself." Isn't that what God has done in Jesus? God became one of us to set us free...

To set us free from the bondage to sin and death - and the mixed messages we hear from culture, from each other and even sometimes from our religious institutions that might suggest that Anger is Evil or Life is all about you. In truth, Life is not about you. It's about God and you. And it's about this God who is not angry about you or with you. Never was. What's clear is that:

"Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." *James 1:17-21*

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church
Olathe, KS

Resources: Rev. Dalton Rushing (8.29.21) for the focus on anger; Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb (8.1.21) for the owl story, both contributors to *Day1*; footnotes on Deuteronomy from Harper Collins (NRSV) Bible;