

The VI Sunday after the Epiphany

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Saint Paul's Episcopal Church/La Iglesia Episcopal de la Resurrección Mount
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In my studies for this sermon, one of the commentators spoke of folk wisdom passed down through the generations. In this case, it had to do with violins and other string instruments; it improves when an instrument is played well. To be honest, there is no evidence, “proof,” for this folk wisdom, either way. Because of this lack, the myth persists. As in any piece of conventional wisdom, it is difficult to create an experiment or study that can prove or disprove the conjecture. So, it is with the faith we see in the readings today.

It is all about trust and in whom, what, and/or where to place that trust. “Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.” Right out of the gate, Jeremiah hits us with, “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert and shall not see when relief comes.” Warning about the “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse--who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.”

There is only so far that conventional wisdom can take us, and the collect for the day points to the answer as we prayed, “O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without

you, give us the help of your grace..." Be like the "tree planted by water," not the "like a shrub in the desert," caught in the status quo; put your roots down deep into the source of living water

Paul is responding to Gentile Christians, most of who had been pagans, in Corinth, they are surrounded by pagans. They have taken on a different worldview than their neighbors, and some are having issues with the idea of resurrection and it highlights the need for faith. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." Words meant to comfort this first-century community. Yet, creates a stumbling block for many in the twenty-first century, in their worldview.

We reaffirm our belief in the resurrection whenever we recite the creeds. But what does that declaration mean for our daily lives? Is it relevant to our time and place? How do we accommodate a first-century worldview to the twenty-first century?

Perhaps it is not about relevance or accommodation, squeezing scripture and God into a box so we can control both. While important, the intellectual path of reading and studying scripture, which is very Episcopalian, can feel safer. It is in the mystery that faith resides. Maybe it is not relevance, we should be looking for, but something out of the realm of music: resonance. To get out of our heads and into feeling scripture in our souls. In the connection of those deviant body parts of Jeremiah and Jesus, that scripture moves deeper into us and is inscribed on our hearts. "Their delight is in the law of the LORD, *and they meditate on his law day and night."

From the First Nations Version, “Creator Sets Free (Jesus), along with his twelve message bearers and a large number of followers, went down from the mountain to where the land was flat. A great number of people came to hear him speak and to be healed.” The Apostles and maybe the disciples were looking for teaching and marching orders. Still, I am guessing the multitude, who had heard of this new itinerant preacher and his powers, were looking, first of all, to be healed, and they had the hope and faith enough to show up. “All the people were trying to touch him, for great power was flowing from him to heal them all.”

Jesus also knew the perverseness of the human heart. People had become convinced that they were successful and powerful, healthy, wealthy, and wise by their own reason and strength, by their hard work in keeping the law. And he saw that the poor, the sinners and tax collectors, the sick and the outcast had been excluded by others and thus didn't dare to expect any better reception from God. We pray for the poor, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, and those in prison not out of pity but to prepare us for a life of discipleship.

Jesus' heart is different and calls to our hearts in what could be called a recruitment sermon based on the song Mary sang to him many times “Where the powerful and proud are brought down and scattered in the imagination of their hearts; where the poor and lowly are gathered up in grace; and where the hungry are filled with good things, while the rich are sent away empty.”

Jesus urges us to hear the promises and the warnings, the blessings and the woes, because our hearts will try to convince us that we have

pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps; God's grace is too good to be true. This Caesar has a better way. While we pray for the poor, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, and those in prison, but discipleship in this world cannot be authentic if they are not among our members. We are not ready to join their ranks.

God is not impartial, and to quote Heather Cox Richardson, "The idea of a small government that serves the needs of a few wealthy people, Lincoln warned in his era, is "the same old serpent that says you work and I eat, you toil, and I will enjoy the fruits of it. Turn in whatever way you will—whether it comes from the mouth of a King, an excuse for enslaving the people of his country, or from the mouth of men of one race as a reason for enslaving the men of another race, it is all the same old serpent."

Quoting Will Willimon, "All I know about Jesus is what I heard him say. There is the quote attributed to, but most likely not, St Francis, some version of "preach the Gospel at all times, use words if necessary." I have had very few instances of resonance in a quiet place during high stress; I usually know what I have heard and then take it deep. "Jesus' sermon is a repeat of Mary's song (Luke 1:45-57.) God takes sides and loves with a love that is not impartial. If we are going to be with this God, the sermon implies, we've got to get down on God's level." God calls us to care for strangers, refugees, widows, orphans, the poor, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, and those in prison because we were once strangers, refugees, widows, orphans, poor, sick, hungry, oppressed, and in prison.