

Homily – Some Things Change and Something Stay the Same

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In just a few short years it will be the year 2030. And, do you know what we get to start doing that year? We get to start celebrating the two thousandth anniversary of much of what happens in our Gospels. Most of Jesus' ministry, as depicted in the Bible, started when he was thirty-years old and that ministry lasted for about three years. I guess that means in 2033 we get to celebration the two thousandth anniversary of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. For two thousand years we have been trying to learn how to be followers of Jesus. We have been attempting to be communities and people who are part of the Jesus movement and all that he taught us. We have been striving to live in a way that reflects the fact that Jesus changed the universe forever. Something in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus changed all of us to this day. If you are like me then every year seems to be passing faster and faster, so the next eight years are going to pass in a flash and soon it will be 2030. And, I recognize that some of you are pretty sure you will not be here in eight years. By then you will have died and moved on to something more beautiful than we can understand. So, I will be curious to hear from those of you in this category to see if you think this sermon hits you differently because your years may be numbered.

Be that as it may, it is amazing to recognize how the wisdom of Jesus has lasted for so long and will continue to be relevant for millennia to come. While many things have changed in two thousand years, some things about our human nature and our spiritual path, these are still the same. We are still beings who have a physical side, a mental side, and a spiritual side. We still form family units, and we still have children. We still have wars, and we still have wealth disparity. And the teachings of Jesus are still relevant today.

In today's gospel reading we have two stories. The first one is a short one about faith and a mustard seed. And we probably all have heard many sermons about faith and how a tiny little mustard seed can grow into something mighty.

However, in the second part of today's Gospel reading Jesus asks a series of questions about the treatment of slaves. These are questions that rubs us wrong in the twenty-first century. Two thousand years ago, everyone in the Greco-Roman world would recognize that the answer to Jesus question was no. Slaves did what they were commanded, masters were not obligated to thank them. Enlightened moralists of two thousand years ago and advocates of the more humane laws of the Torah could argue that slaves should be treated well. Masters might even free them for loyal service, but few sought to overturn the system, nor does today's parable. Indeed it makes no comment on the slave system or the master/slave relationship. It's simply uses the

logic of the system to describe the nature of what ought to be done. New Testament scholar Markus Barth, son of the very famous theologian Karl Barth, used to tell his students “if you can’t find the Word in the text, it isn’t text’s fault. Go back and try again. Dig deeper.” This past Wednesday, in our monthly Zoom that our Bishop has with the clergy of the diocese one of my colleagues advised preachers to avoid the slave stuff in today’s gospel reading. The Bishop countered this advice by suggesting that preachers lean into the slave stuff because it would bear much fruit. So, I have three points to make about the slave stuff. These are in order of complexity, and I start with the simplest of these concepts.

First, when one studies the Bible one must always understand the historical context in which the text was written. Palestine was part of the Roman Empire and this region had a long history of rebelling against that Empire. The Romans were often brutal in repressing any rebelling, and mass executions were not unheard of. Slavery was a normal part of the economic and social system, and no one questioned the morality of this system. Two thousand years ago, one probably couldn’t conceive of a system without slavery, and even poorer Jewish families often had at least one slave. Even poorer families would sell their children into slavery as a way of making sure they were fed. And, then there is the treatment and lack of rights for women. Jesus lived in a time and place in which the norms could be quite different from today. Again, slavery was normal.

The second point I want to make about slavery is that its normalcy two thousand years ago should prompt us to look at the norms we have today. Which of our twenty-first century norms will look crass and immoral to those who are two thousand years in our future, or even one hundred years from now. Which of our societal norms will be wrong? There is still slavery in parts of the world and in many parts of the world women lack rights that are enjoyed by men. Yes, it is important to fix these things in other parts of the world, but I wonder what are we getting wrong in twenty-first century America? Capitalism is our normal economic model, and I think we benefit from the interplay of supply and demand and the balancing of the markets. But unbridled capitalism has led to enormous income disparity and a rising tide of wealth has certainly not lifted all. Some have been left in the dust. And consumerism has led to a lot of waste and pollution. It has led to a lot of cool stuff, but I can’t be the only one who buys things that are unnecessary. And on a totally separate note, we incarcerate way too many, especially men of color. And, how can we still have a death penalty?

I wonder if these things will be fixed in the future or if we are always going to be living with these things. Two thousand years ago, they couldn’t imagine living in a world without slavery. Do we also live with a failure of imagination?

I often talk about a vision in which we are the hands and feet and voice of Jesus here in this part of our world. Do you think we are better at this Jesus stuff than the folks of five hundred years ago? Five hundred years from now, will our churches have figured out how to better equip folks to be Christ in the world. Will future generations be better at reflecting God's love back out into the world, or will this stay static with today? What do you think? I am an optimist. As I look at the improvements with the rights of women and LGBT folk, I am an optimist that believes things will continue to get better. It makes me impatient for the future, and I have a deep desire to make some of those future good things happen now.

And, I think meditation and contemplative practices are the most underutilized methods we have to better live into this future vision. We all have to work on our own stuff, and you can't regularly sit and meditate without having some improvement in your spiritual life. There are many contemplative spiritual practices that quiet the monkey brain and help us lean into silence, stillness, and solitude. I don't know the numbers, but today maybe five to ten percent of people do contemplative spiritual practices. I wonder how long it will take to get to fifty percent. Can you imagine the changes in our world if fifty percent of people did meditation several times a week. Maybe two thousand years from now they will look back and be astounded that we didn't recognize how God works through contemplation. Our Gospel reading about slavery makes me wonder what norms we get wrong today, and how are we going to change?

And there is a third point I want to make about slavery. One of the things that I have noticed is that Jesus often worked within the culture and societal norms of his day. Children had no rights, and as I already said they could be sold into slavery by their fathers. In addition, women had few rights. And slaves had few rights. We certainly have stories of Jesus lifting up children, women, and slaves. He treated all with dignity and respect, but he didn't lead rebellion against these norms. Instead, as I read about Jesus or read the words of the Apostle Paul, I hear a message that is said over and over. And that message is don't let your troubles and misfortunes get in the way of a relationship with God. When something bad happens don't push God away. When you are one of the less privileged in society don't let it dampen your love of God. When you are the twenty-first century equivalent of a slave be with God. When you have trouble with your health, stay with God. In know this is considered easier for a privileged white American man to say. But, I will say it anyway. Stay with God. Stay with God. Stay with God. Any harm or pain from misfortune is multiplied when you push God away. God is always present with us and in love with us. Stay with God.

Now, I want to recognize one thing that can make is very tough to stay with God. And, that is when our churches push you down. Throughout our history, and even today,

churches push some down and send them the message that they are worth less than others. And, the normal reaction to being put down by the church is to reject both the church and God. This is a very sad situation. If you have been put down by the church then please, please, please do not push God away, and instead find a different church. And, unfortunately this is not just something those other churches do. Sometimes we do it here at St. Barnabas. When we push people down I pray we see it, repent and do better. I know you want to do better too.

So, today we wrestled with some very difficult texts about slavery. We found some ways to use these texts to improve our spiritual journeys. We believe that all of Scripture is the inspired word of God, and all of it has use in our lived lives. Sometime we just need to dig a little deeper to see God. In eight years we begin celebrating the two thousandth anniversary of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. Today, what are you going to do to ensure you take a step forward in the way you reflect God's love out into the world?