

Sermon Proper 21

It is still about the "little ones."

Last week at Okatibbee Lake, I had one of those rare moments when I wanted to use a prop during my sermon. It was outside, and two years in a row we had a gentle breeze coming from the lake to make a lingering summer day a beautiful one. So much so that my son slept through it all and I didn't want to move him. But, it was last week when Jesus took a little one, a child in his arms as the disciples argued over who was the greatest.

And if you are wondering, Jesus hasn't put the child down. This is important since we just heard such a difficult passage about judgment. These are about as harsh as they come; genocide, unquenchable fire and the loss of sight and limbs. It's a side of Jesus we don't like, a side of Jesus who toes a hard line.

And instead of determining who is truly the greatest, the conversation turns into who is on our side. Someone has been casting out demons outside of Jesus' immediate followers and the disciples, well, are jealous again. They want to be the ones with the power. They want to be the ones with the voice and the authority. They were supposed to be the chosen ones.

But Jesus hasn't put the child down. Holding the child in his arms, a child who must put their entire trust in the one holding them. "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me." It's helpful to know when the disciples come, and well when we come; complaining to our Christ about what others are doing, or desiring advancement or dominance, Jesus draws their attention back to the helpless and exploited. This is their work. This is the tough part about saying yes to following the Christ. "Take care of these little ones and don't let them go."

But it is the word "if" here that causes us so much anxiety this day isn't it. "If" we put up stumbling blocks between us and caring for one another, especially one of these little ones, terrible things will happen.

So much about our faith has become individualized. Even for the disciples, their concern is about their relationship themselves and Jesus and often are at odds with one another. But Jesus once again draws them back, and us back, that Church is not about just me and my God hanging out together. Again and again, Jesus teaches them and us, how to follow within a whole community. The consequences between one another are not just for me.

Now, we don't talk about hell in our tradition very often. And if I did I would spend a considerable time in Sunday formation helping with context but that is

for a different day. But what is important to know when hearing these tough words from Jesus is context. The word hell in this passage, refers to Gehenna, or The Valley of Hinnom. It is an actual place, a valley just south of Jerusalem where some of the kings of Judah sacrificed their children by fire. It became a place of judgment, a destination of the wicked. This is where our modern interpretation of hell came from. And yes it is horrifying to think about.

Which is why Jesus, *still* holds a child and won't let them go. Saying to the disciples, and to us, don't do what your ancestors did to the least of these. If you do not care for the most vulnerable ones, terrible things will happen. But they will happen to all of us. If we abandon those who have put their whole trust in us, our community is doomed. If we do not care and love for our children, the whole future of our people is lost forever.

The way we live our life of faith; what we do to one another has consequences. Who I am as a follower of Jesus does have repercussions. Our actions really do affect us. All of us.

But we do sometimes let the children go. When we refuse to listen to the other side of the isle we are cut off from one another. When we focus on our own interests or making ourselves into the best, the rightful ones, we lose sight of our children. This is my church. This is my town. This is my country.

But this is real. It is a real struggle for those who rely on us to care for them. I can only imagine how it must feel for those who are marginalized and don't feel held. It must be hell when we lose sight of our children. I can only imagine the hell it must be to live cut off from the community, too afraid to speak often for decades.

We too like Jesus somehow hold the children in our arms and not let them go. We can't put the child down to be demoralized or broken by the evils of our world. We can't let them go and fall into the many ways we can create stumbling blocks from grace. You know them. Those constant and consistent obstructions that just keep on coming. Even in the church we feel we made strides but fall back into being the best and the rightful ones. Where are the places we use the vulnerable to advance our own desires? How are we dying in ourselves, instead of living for those around us?

We know all too well what happens when we don't receive one another as little children. We know what happens when we don't hold onto the defenseless the voiceless. We know what happens when the oppressor attacks the "little ones."

Jesus' concern for "little ones" or "powerless ones" is everything.

One of those times where Jesus shows passion; even anger for allowing God's children know pain.

And it is the same God who lets go, opens up to suffering and death, in order to hold and care for each of us.

Through a difficult story, Be at Peace with one another."

Sometimes Peace comes doesn't come so easily.

It takes the grace of God

through listening, holding pains of another, cherishing the least of these.

We are invited to hold onto what is most dear. Cherish the little ones, all of them.