

Worship for Sept. 24, 2023

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship

Gracious God,
give us pure hearts that we may see you,
humble hearts that we may hear you,
hearts of love that we may serve you,
hearts of faith that we may live in you,
reverent hearts that we may worship you,
here and in the world beyond our doors,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Hymn 32 I Sing the Mighty Power of God

Prayer of the Day

**Direct and help us, O Lord, in all our deeds,
that by what is begun, continued, and ended in you,
we may glorify your holy name,
and finally, by your mercy, come to know the joy everlasting life,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,
now and forever. Amen.**

First Reading Esther 7:1-6; 9-10; 9:20-22

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Mark 9:38-50

Morning Message

Nah nah nah nah nah!

That's universal for:

“Shame on you!”

“Serves you right!”

“I'm telling Mom...or Dad...or the teacher.”

“I'm better than you are!”

The first few verses of today's text remind me of some over-eager kids running up to the teacher on the playground to tattle on a classmate. I've been on both sides of that, I confess.

The disciples, eager to follow the rules of this new movement, have encountered someone performing a healing rite, in this case, casting out demons, doing so in Jesus' name. It's the use of Jesus' name that catches their attention. The healer wasn't one of the twelve, so the act wasn't legitimate, at least the way they saw it. So, they try to stop him.

Apparently they were unsuccessful and they run to Jesus. "Master, someone is practicing healing without a license!"

Surely, Jesus would drop what he was doing and follow them to the scene of the crime so he could rebuke the wrong-doer. He would set the healer straight. Only the qualified were eligible to do deeds of power in Jesus' name. All others were cheap imitations.

But, that's not what happened. Once again, Jesus does the unexpected. The shame and blame aspect of this report doesn't grab his attention. What grabs him is that a believer has tapped into the source of power and changes the life of one who suffered. He doesn't need to itinerate with Jesus and the twelve to be legit.

He goes on to lay a pretty heavy message on the disciples. He tells them they are in the wrong in confronting the believer. Jesus calls them "little ones," indicating they are young in the faith. The greater sin would be for the disciples to break that new believer's spirit.

Jesus says even the smallest kindness done in his name comes from a holy place.

To underscore his message, Jesus tells them that if they think it's their duty to inspect the activity of new believers, they are way off the mark. It would be better if they drowned in the sea. That's pretty serious.

He carries that further and tells them to be aware of their own sins and stop committing them, even if they have to amputate the body part involved in the sin.

Reading between the lines, we can almost hear Jesus saying that there are greater challenges ahead of them and getting hung up in the trivial would only sap their strength. There's a lesson there for all of us.

In a few years, the fledgling church will be under persecution. They would have to identify and reject false religions. And they did at great peril. They refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods. The penalty for that was high. You might be forced into slavery or used for sport in the Coliseum. Or, even worse, failing to pay homage to the Roman gods might earn you the mutilation of your body in order to serve as warning to the rest of the community.

Threats have always been a strong source for control. Who wants to sign up for slavery or mutilation? Not many. But, thanks be to God, some came to faith, or found their faith strengthened by those whose courageous allegiance was to Christ.

I have never been persecuted for my faith. Our community is full of Christian churches. There are Jewish and Muslim houses of worship as well. As the people of God, they all do Godly work. They provide places of welcome and inclusion, free from threats.

I do know someone who was persecuted for her faith, my friend, Mary. Originally from Malawi, she had come to the US for her education. She earned three degrees and became a sought-after college professor. But it was her faith that motivated her and she lived it out in joy.

Church membership in Malawi came with a price. Mary and her family were Presbyterians. Her brother and father were elders, which meant that they performed all the tasks a pastor would perform here. They were responsible for the spiritual needs of a whole community. An ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament itinerated among several communities. They might see him a couple of times a year.

Malawi is a poor country. Mary and her family belonged to a movement of citizens who were trying to improve the lives of the people through self-development, to get people off the streets and into respectable occupations, and to have agency in that society, to have a voice.

Mary helped women start cottage industries and retail shops. Others in the family entered politics so that they might turn around a government that had oppressed the people for far too long. While she was in Huntington, Mary's was elected Vice President of the country.

Their reward was to be repeatedly attacked. Their home was burned down. Her husband died a suspicious death. She came to the states, along with some of her children and her niece. They worked hard and they came to know the peace and safety we enjoy as American citizens. And yet, they always carried a sense of duty for the people of their homeland, whose faith comes with a price.

We do not face that kind of oppression. No abusive regime stands between us and our faith. We do have challenges to our faith. COVID has changed our lives, our communities, and our churches. I did a hospital visit Thursday and the sign was up once more at the entrance: all visitors must wear a mask. So, I donned a mask and carried on.

I do a lot of work in the presbytery. What I hear around the presbytery is that all of our churches have lost members at a rapid rate. Naturally, that means funds take a dive, too. The presbytery has had to take steps to address these realities. The staff may be downsized. The office property

has been sold. We have far fewer in-person committee meetings, thanks to the Zoom era. We will have to be intentional in our efforts to be a connectional church. That's change and it can be hard. But it's a far cry from oppression and suffering.

The Church may change, but she will not die. The church is the body of Christ and he is very much alive. And he has a message for such a time as this.

Jesus turns the conversation to the subject of salt. In the English language there are a number of expressions, idioms, referring to salt. "He is not worth his salt." "Taken with a grain of salt." "Salt of the earth."

Salt is an important element. The human body needs salt. The word "salary" derives from the Latin word "salarium," and literally means "salt money." Salarium was the money paid to Roman soldiers. Some historians have concluded that the soldiers may have actually been paid in salt. In days gone by, newborn babies were washed with salt. Salt has an element of healing. It has been used as a disinfectant. And, of course, salt adds flavor to food and can be used in preserving it.

Jesus tells his friends that everyone will be salted with fire. What did he mean? Fire is a method of purification. Precious metals come from the ground admixed with iron and other minerals. Subjecting them to fire purifies the gold or silver, separating them from the other metals. So, too, a Christian's life will be tested and challenged but in this way, we, too, are purified. We grow in grace. The churchy word for this process is sanctification. With age and experience we draw ever closer to God in Christ.

Jan Richardson is a pastor, artist, and author. She offers these words about our text today:

And, so, in this season,
may we give ourselves
to the fire that shows us
what is elemental.
and sacramental.
that reveals what remains
after all that does not have
substance or savor
falls away.
May we turn
our eyes
our ears
our hands
to the beauty

for which we are formed
and bear with grace
the patterns
that blossom upon us
who live salted
and singed.

May the fire of purification reveal the Holy One in your heart. Amen.

*Hymn 838 Standing On the Promises, verses 1 and 2

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed

* Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings including contributions for ECCHO and Centsability

Prayer of Dedication

Lord God, as we offer our hearts and our treasure, may they be used to pass on the promises of your kingdom- of hope, of peace, and of life, to all in need of your presence in their, and our, lives. Amen.

*Hymn 838 Standing On the Promises, verses 3 and 4

*Blessing

Go now in the power of the Spirit,
that you may proclaim Christ's redeeming love to the world,
and continue forever in the risen life. Amen.

*Postlude