

Boast in God's Mercy.

What ***Interesting*** lessons we have this morning! (I was taught long ago to use the word "interesting" in polite conversation, when saying the truth would get me into trouble...)

The Old Testament lesson and Psalm aren't bad. We have Jeremiah's vision of the potter making pots out of clay, and when there is a fault, starting over with the same lump, until it is pleasing. The vision goes on to talk about the rise and fall of Kingdoms, but I got stuck on the vision of the potter at his wheel. For I identify with that lump of clay, being shaped, and then re-shaped by a master potter's hand. I find it very hopeful that God isn't finished with me yet, that I can still be moulded, shaped and changed into a more useful, more faithful, more beautiful vessel. Now this analogy does fall apart in one crucial way. The lump of clay cannot say "no" to the potter's hand, while you and I CAN say no to God and to the work and changes that God would make in our lives, our history. We can choose to stay unformed or malformed, refuse the perfection of God's daughters and sons in God's kingdom, to which we are called.

The Psalmist reminds us:

For you yourself created my inmost parts; *
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I will thank you because I am marvelously made; *
your works are wonderful, and I know it well.

Then there is Paul. This morning we get a whole letter – in one reading. But it is a strange one, with Paul pleading on behalf of a run-away slave, Onesimus, who is now a Christian convert and has been serving Paul. He is writing to Philemon, asking him to take the run-away back with open arms and accept him as a brother in Christ. But to me, at least, it is a disappointment. Paul doesn't take his understanding of Gospel equality ("In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female, slave nor free") and apply it practically and ask Philemon to set his slave free.

And finally this morning's Gospel: ***VERY INTERESTING*** indeed! "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." This, followed by a whole string of interesting snippets about

discipleship and counting the cost, and settling for peace – and, O yes, lest we forget, giving up all our possessions! I ask myself – where exactly is the Good News in this passage?!

In defense of St. Luke, I think we are victims this morning of the Gospel “Sound Bite”. You know, the memorable phrase that gets lifted out of context, but because it is memorable, it is the thing that sticks. Can’t you just see the tabloid headlines: “Good Jewish Boy Goes BAAD – says hate your mother” and the sub-heading: Mary, in seclusion ponders “What did I do wrong?” or “Where’s the gratitude?” Inquiring minds want to know!

I’m willing to bet that Jesus really did say something like “Hate your mother and father and family” in the context of an argument. He was using Hyperbole – exaggeration – to make his point. We still do that today. Just listen to Mr. Trump for five minutes.

I’m pretty sure Jesus was making the point that loving and serving God, becoming Jesus’ disciple is a costly, demanding, all consuming commitment. Not a decision to be made lightly after hearing one shining oration. Luke tells us that these words were directed at the larger crowd and not to Jesus’ inner circle of disciples.

I think that Collect for today pulls these ideas together in a lovely way.

“Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.”

Our own strength, our own possessions, our family connections, our personal power or ambition cannot save us. Only our trust in God and our boasting of God’s Mercy will see us through.

I love that phrase “Boasting of God’s Mercy”, and ask you to consider with me what that may look like:

- Self-effacing
- Other directed, other serving, loving where there is no guarantee of being loved in return.
- Boasting of a community where the norms are love, inclusion and acceptance and care for the least and neediest of our brothers and sisters, not intolerance or bigotry or blindness to poverty, unemployment or failed access to healthcare.
- A community and individuals open to growth and change, willing to let the potter’s hand do her work.

- Boasting of God's mercy, which sees us as all alike, slave or free, male or female, gay or straight. God's mercy which loves and embraces us all.
- God's mercy which sees and would address real needs of people, for shelter, food, opportunity, dignity and joy.

Sound bites lie – or at best they tell only partial or biased truths, and hide other truths when they may be inconvenient.

As God's beloveds we are called to do the hard work of seeking out the truths that count. Discovering as much of the truth as we are able. We need to do the hard work of trusting our lives to God, allowing God to shape and mould us, and of serving others in God's name. And that does mean difficult chores ahead. It does mean carrying our own crosses, counting our own costs.

But when we boast in God's Mercy – then and only then are we truly strong. Then, and only then, can God's love show forth clearly and powerfully in our lives.

AMEN.