

September 27 2015 Year B Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Newport United Church of Christ

Scripture

Psalm 19, No. 68

James 5:13-16

Mark 9:42-50

Sermon *Radical Religion*

I can still hear ringing in my ears, after almost 40 years the words of many of my family members when I decided to go to seminary. “Don’t take your religion too seriously” they said. “Don’t get carried away”. “Don’t be too fanatically”. “Don’t be a radical”. That is a common bit of advice that is often just out in our society. In our culture religious faith, religious institutions, houses of worship, even sacred scriptures play an important role; more important than in some societies, not as much as in others to be sure. But as important as religion is to us in our society we still often keep it pretty much under control. We keep it tame. And that often seems like a wise thing to do. Look for example at some fanatically religious people in either in our own country or elsewhere around the world. Look at the history of our faith and at other faiths around the world. You see a frightening phenomenon, as Eric Kaper taught us in a classic book of a generation ago, what he calls the true believer is often a dangerous person. Obviously the authors of the 9-11 attack behind the Islamic faith come to mind, so also the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the just barely ended religious war in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants; and the seemingly endless conflict between the Jews and the Palestinians in Israel and the Christian overtones of the Neo-Nazi and White Supremacists with roots even here in our own area. And who can forget the most bizarre case of all, the famous Jonestown suicide where all too many true believers drank the Kool-Aid and followed Jim Jones into a mass death.

And then again some religious people, Christians amongst them don’t think enough religion is injected into our society at all. And they might be right in some ways but to hear some of the talk even the Presidential candidates, town clerk for television and media personalities. What they seem to be looking for is a kind of theocracy something like what ruled in old New England in our early history; where those who were accused of witch craft were burned at the stake. And anyone who didn’t agree with the established religion, Quakers, Jews or Baptists was exiled or put in prison or even worse. The rhetoric of those folks seems very sad, very angry, it has punishing kind of tone and is a far cry from the joyful, loving, and inviting faith of Jesus that most of us should follow.

And into this mix comes the Jesus in our gospel lesson for today with words like stumbling blocks, millstones, cutting off hands, and feet, plucking out eyes, and being very, very salty. All of this seems terribly, terribly radical and I am here to tell you, it is radical. Because religion for Jesus is not some delight religion, for Jesus is not some kind of decorator item meant to pretty up the world around us. Religion for Jesus is not merely something nice to have in small easy to take doses instead religion for Jesus is something powerful and is something radical.

So let back off for just a minute and take a look up that word radical in the dictionary and there we find that what the word means proceeding from the root or foundation from something. Something that is essential, radical in its purest sense doesn't mean dangerous at all. It means something that is essential. It means something that is at the very heart or center of things. That is the original meaning. It comes from the Latin root—from the center.

So when Jesus makes these radical statements like those in Mark's Gospel, then, he is calling us as his followers to see our faith as central in the lives that we lead. Jesus is calling each one of us to look at the very center of our human existence and see what truly counts in life. Certainly he doesn't call us to tie millstones around people's necks, nor does he want us to literally cut off hands and feet and pluck out eyeballs. What he does want us to be very; very salty in the way we live our lives.

I think Jesus is using this extreme language to get our attention and remind us of just how urgent his kind of salt is our hurting and broken world. And as we have said before salt; what does salt do? Well in just the right amount, it flavors and slowly permeates the food which is good and in a world without refrigeration what did it do? It preserves, it saves and keeps food which is in danger of spoiling. If you use too little it does no good if you dump it all in at once as my grandmother did with her cake, the food is ruined beyond repair.

And so it is with the essential, central, radical in the most literally sense of the word, a faith that Jesus calls each one of us. The faith that calls the powers to be in the world into account, to be sure when it comes in how we treat each other in society but a faith that is filled with all the joy, with of all the care, with all the compassion, with all the love that each of us can mustard, remembering what Jesus told us time and time again, what is essential, central in our faith of loving God who is love, with all that we have and loving our neighbor whether right next-door or a refugee clear across the sea just as we love ourselves.

And that why it was so educationally and inspiring on the one hand and kind of sad on the other hand to hear people of religious faith criticize the words of Pope Francis on his recent visit to several of our U.S. cities. When in my mind he was speaking on what is seemly the central aspect of the Gospel like the Golden Rule, doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, caring for the least and

those on the margin of society, working together for the common good for a change and being good stewards in the way that we take care of God's earth. Even people, who normally believe that the Pope is infallible are willing to say words like this, he needs to keep his religion out of politics because what he is saying is dangerous.

Well in one sense in what they said is right but the faith of Jesus Christ is a dangerous thing. It is especially dangerous to old and hurtful ways of doing things; it is dangerous to selfishness; it is dangerous to greed; it is dangerous to crime; it is dangerous to violence; it is dangerous to death; it is dangerous to unloving and unforgiving ways that would destroy our society and destroy our world; this radical religion is not just dangerous to business as usual, it also calls each of us as followers of Jesus that time and time again back to our center, back to our core; back to what is important; it calls us back to faith; it calls us back to love; it calls us back to hope; it calls us back to God. This is not a blind faith of a zealot, this is not angry and intolerant faith of a fanatic, and this instead is a welcoming joyful faith of Jesus of Nazareth, the faith in a God of pure love. Today Jesus calls us out of our faith into a radical religion and the question we must ask ourselves this morning, is this do I dare be that kind of radical? Do I dare to be that kind of radical in the way I live my life? And together we say Amen.