

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021B

Paul's cryptic remarks about his thorn in the flesh have scholars in a dither: Does he mean a spiritual demon, a physical or mental illness, a sin of some kind, or a literal opponent? Most preachers believe he is really talking about the struggle we all face between relying on our own powers rather than trusting in God. Truth is, we don't often trust God. I have to admit that one thorn in my flesh is the sin of thinking I am in control of every situation. An incident that occurred in Kangirsuk, an Inuit village on the Ungava coast of Nunavik, proved me wrong.

One morning there was a knock on the door of the house in which I was staying. A woman of indeterminate age (I would guess over 70) came into the house and asked me if she could speak with me. This is her story.

"My name is Emelie. I was born in an igloo. My mother told me it was at the time that the geese begin to return. I don't know how many winters I have lived. Because of what happened to me when I was just becoming a woman, I decided I would never be in the presence of a hallunat (white man) nor would I ever learn his tongue. But for days I have been passing this house and something told me it would be safe to come in and tell my story. As I said when I was just becoming a woman several hallunat (white men), construction workers, grabbed me and locked me up in a shed they had made. For weeks they gang raped me. I eventually escaped but my life has never been good since then. I have often thought of suicide and one time I nearly succeeded. For most of my life I have been an alcoholic."

All the while as she was speaking, I was thinking of how I was going to respond to this horrific story. I was thinking of all the brilliant things I could say to her. But a tiny voice, in my head, kept saying, "Ask Emelie if she would like a hug." I kept thinking that that would be a ridiculous thing to say. After all she had been brutalized by white men and she has stated her profound dislike of hallunat (white men). The little voice persisted, "Ask Emelie if she would like a hug." When it was time for me to respond I said, "Emelie, would you like a hug?" much to the astonishment of my Inuk translator Ulaiyou. I too was astonished by having said that. She immediately accepted a hug and we cried. It was at this moment that we were able to enter into a deeply meaningful and healing dialogue. So much for me having brilliant remarks and being in control.

Sometimes we get the impression that Jesus is plain unstoppable. Angels wait on him in the desert. Wind and sea obey him. He walks on water when it suits him. Demons cut and run at his command. He can invite 5,000 friends over and not worry about having enough food. He preaches the Sermon on the Mount without note cards. To Jesus, even death is just another door to pass through on the way to bigger and better life. And until he is good and ready to open that door, no mob can lay hands on him. He just calmly walks through them and is on his way.

Jesus seems to be in charge every step of the way, from the choosing of his first followers to the surrender of his will when his hour finally arrives. Nobody outwits him, and no secret is hidden from him. So, is there anything Jesus can't do? Oh yes there is! Jesus can't overcome the absence of faith. It would be contrary to the divine gift of humanity's free will for Jesus to force wholeness on anyone. Jesus can break the laws of physics and biology like bread sticks, and even a select number of Torah regulations like those governing the Sabbath and uncleanness, if he so chooses. But he can't do a workaround when it comes to the matter of faith. If you and I don't trust him, then that's that.

The gift of prophecy is a fine thing to receive. But Ezekiel, for example, soon learns what every prophet must: that all the Spirit in the world is not necessarily going to soften the hardened heart. Breaking open that heart is not the prophet's job, in the end. Whether the people heed or resist, the proclamation must be delivered and the possibility of redemption extended. End of responsibility, insofar as the prophet is concerned.

And if the people of Nineveh won't answer the door, that's their problem. But sometimes, unexpectedly and rather spectacularly, they will. Think Zacchaeus, the good thief, Saint Paul, and Saint Augustine, for starters. Sometimes all it takes to unlock the human heart is to find the right key. So God remains the God of Second Chances. Cain gets a mark that preserves his life. Abraham is forgiven his lies and David his adultery and murderous cover-up. After sin, life goes on because it's only in the midst of life that there's hope of redemption. It's up to the individual sinner whether that second chance is going to be a fresh start or a reprise.

Many people resist change because it comes with a price tag attached. Sometimes the cost is merely pride, but it can also include the surrendering of habits, the ditching of companions, dissolving the unequal yoke, handing over money, or

forgiving your enemies. When Jesus came and preached in his hometown, the thing required of his friends and neighbors was to let go of envy. One of their own had surpassed them, and people generally don't take kindly to that sort of thing. It's always easier for us to put others down than to look up to them.

So Jesus, a hero and healer everywhere he went, was viewed as a show-off and charlatan in Nazareth. He still managed to cure a few sick people, because the sick can't afford to snub an opportunity for hope and help. But those without obvious needs did not extend their faith to him, or even offer him the benefit of the doubt. Nazareth, ironically, remains the low point in Jesus' ministry from Galilee to Jerusalem. They knew him too well to see who he was.

After Nazareth, if not before, Jesus had to embrace the reality of certain limitations. Not everyone who listened to him would hear. Not everyone who shouted Hosanna would be around in a week. Even one of the twelve apostles would betray him in time. No one gets around the freedom of humanity to say no—not even if you're the Son of God.

It's curious that the stuff of least value to us is usually what we cling to most possessively: the secret of our pettiness, our arrogance, and the rottenness at the center of our hearts. The angel of Satan that pummels us inside and out, by any other name, is a creature telling us unwelcome truths about ourselves. Why not listen, admit who we are, and hand over that person—envy, meanness, pride, and all—to the God who sees all anyway?

We have nothing to gain from hiding our true selves away, and so much potential transformation ahead of us by traveling honestly. It takes more trust in God to admit we are sinners than to insist we are so good. But only those who come forward for the healing get it.

Deacon Gerry