

## Stumbling Blocks

You don't have to say a word.

I can already hear you chuckling to yourself.

Wasn't Father David — just last week — talking about everybody being saved?!

Wasn't he saying that "all shall be well", not just for the very best, but for the very worst too?!

Yet today, one week later, here's Jesus, saying exactly the opposite!

Isn't Jesus saying that if we don't get our act together, get ready for an eternity in hell?

Isn't Jesus implying that only the few will be saved?

While the many will be condemned?

In short, isn't today's gospel lesson verifying what we've always suspected?

That it really is about "us against them."

"Insiders and outsiders."

The "saved and the damned."

And if that's true, then — yippee!

Let's get back to our partisan warfare!

To our hatred of those who aren't like us.

To preserving and protecting those who are.

The rest of the world?

Get lost!

Which, when we're honest, is the place most folks love to be.

Because the rules for what's good and bad, right and wrong, are seemingly so clear when we live in that world.

It's a world that is simple.

Comfortable.

And understandable.

However, if we've learned anything about Jesus, he's anything but simple, comfortable, or even understandable.

And therefore, I respectfully suggest that the notion of universal salvation — and the teaching that Jesus gives us today — are in no way opposed.

They don't contradict each other.

Because they are addressing two different problems.

Universal salvation is all about what God does.

Today's gospel lesson is all about what **we** shall do.

It's why I prefer presiding over funerals rather than weddings.

Because with funerals, God is in charge.

While with weddings, people are.

Which brings us to our entry point for today's gospel lesson.

In order to grasp today's gospel we need to answer some fundamental questions.

First, who is Jesus?

Jesus is the fulfillment of God's plan for the Jewish people.

Second, why did God choose these particular folks, the Jews?

It certainly wasn't to create a group of people who muddle through this world in the hope of strumming a harp on a cloud in heaven after they die.

Because the Jewish people had almost no concept of an afterlife.

There was this vague sense of a place called Sheol.

The place of the dead.

Which was something like a mixture of our later inventions of purgatory and limbo.

A dark, nondescript place where the souls of the dead remain.

Rather, God calls the Jewish people out of anonymity and out of slavery, so that they might become the beloved community!

He gives them laws intended to create exactly that community.

There are dietary laws intended to keep them safe and healthy.

As everyone knows, pigs carry trichinosis (worms).

And shellfish often cause violent food sickness.

Just ask anyone who's swallowed raw a bad oyster!

So the law says, stay away from that stuff!

He also gives them laws about welcoming the stranger.

The immigrant.

The alien.

With special consideration to be paid to the orphan and the widow.

Farms are not to be harvested from edge to edge, but rather food is to be left for those in need.

And every 50 years, all debts are forgiven, the lands returned to their original owners.

Most importantly, he commands them to worship only one God, the Creator of all that is.

Because to worship anything less is to worship merely created things.

Which undermines the very purpose for which we were created: to be God's stewards of this magnificent creation.

If I bow down to my pension fund or national flag or Walmart my spirit-filled humanity suffers.

Restoring humanity to its proper place in creation is what God set out to create in the Jewish people.

When the people of Israel forget who they are called to become, God sends them prophets to remind them of their fundamental duty — and destiny.

The prophet Micah sums up all of the prophets so beautifully when he says:

"God has shown you, O mortal, what is good. ... To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Which is simply another way of saying what Jesus says when he sums up the law and the prophets:

"Love God with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself."

And who is my neighbor?

Everyone and anyone in need.

Jesus comes to create the beloved community.

Which is why when Jesus talks today about sin and its dangers, maybe he's not talking about hell after we die, but hell on earth.

"Sin" is the condition of separation.

Separation from ourselves.

From one another.

From God.

That's what "sin" is.

We are separated from ourselves when we allow our egos to run rampant.

When pride, greed, and envy rule our lives, we are separated from the core of who we are, beloved children of God.

We become separated from one another when we only look out for ourselves.

When we choose tribe or race or nation over the unity that all of humanity shares.

And when we are separated from ourselves and one another, we are inevitably separated from God.

Which is why an entirely private, individualized religious faith is so dangerous.

Because it allows us to entertain the fantasy that we can be connected to God — even though we are cut off from one another — and our own selves.

That fantasy is a lie.

Jesus envisions drastic action (gouged eyes, hacked arms) because of the consequences of that lie.

So we can avoid them!

Because those consequences don't wait for us to die.

Care for some eternal fire?

Take a trip to California!

How about that worm that never dies?

Behold the effects of ever-worsening climate change on food production around the world.

And how's about those politicians in the pocket of the fossil fuel industry, who continue to naysay climate change even as the time for drastic action is passing us by?

The horrors of hell are right here, now!

And that's the distinction between last week and this week.

Universal salvation is all about the after-life — about what God will do to bring everyone home.

But this week, what Jesus is honing in on is “eternal life.”

And eternal life and the afterlife are not the same thing.

We know this because in John's Gospel, Jesus is constantly inviting us to enter into eternal life now, today, this very moment.

Eternal life is living a life of connection to ourselves, to one another, and to God.



And when we are able to live those connections in lives focused on service, humility, kindness, compassion and joy, we are already there!

It's a life that, for nearly all of us, we only catch in rare glimpses.

But the more we seek eternal life, the more it may linger in our midst.

So let's not mislead the little ones by saying things like, "it's OK to rape the earth and take whatever we want to support the lifestyle that we choose, as long as we get on our knees on Sunday and pray to God."

Let's not mislead the little ones by saying that somehow "racial superiority, ethnic cleansing, or gross disparities of wealth are sanctioned by God."

Jesus gives us fair warning that the punishment for these lies is most unpleasant.

Instead, let us take up the task that God first laid at the feet of the Jewish people.

The task he fulfills in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Let's build the beloved community!

Let's seek out common ground with one another!

Let's hear one another!

Forgive one another!

Reach out to one another!

For when we do, it's then that we have salt in ourselves.

Salt that's been purified – with the fire of love in action.

Leaving our destiny in the next life – to the tender mercy of God  
– who longs to bring everyone home.

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