

## Proper 21 Year B

Please excuse me from being riled up. Jesus is riled up in this passage from Mark. In the Spring of 2017 five or six months after Donald Trump was elected president, our bishop called a special meeting of the clergy of the diocese. The reason for the bishop's calling the meeting was because he had heard from parishioners at St. Stephens, his former parish in Birmingham before he was elected bishop, that the parish was deeply divided; that the political climate had taken its toll so much so that a substantial number of parishioners left the church. Many of the parish had quit speaking to each other. The bishop told us that he had dear friends whom he loved at each other's throats. The bishop wanted to hear from us about the state of our parishes. He wanted to get a sense of the climate in our own diocese; if we were affected by this new dark political age. There were only about twenty of us who showed up for the meeting. Clergy began to speak, as clergy are wont to do, and most lamented that it was too risky to speak of political matters; that to engage the current issues facing our common life would divide us; that matters of justice take time. People have to be brought along slowly, they said.

I could feel the institutional pall settle over the room.... “We need to be careful about how we speak about these things,” said one clergyperson... “Many of my people are just not where I am.... “We need to move slowly, another clergy person said, “you know, tap dance our way into the issues.” ....” because there are many Episcopalians who feel that we need not speak of such things because they are too political.... Too unseemly... that the church has no business meddling in politics.

Another priest then intervened... “Let’s find an issue that won’t step on any toes... something the whole diocese can get behind.” And I thought, almost out loud, when does the truth not step on toes? Who said this enterprise called Christianity should be comfortable... When did we lose our prophetic edge, I wondered? And I thought... The church is not here to protect us... not from illness, not from pain... and certainly not from ideas and controversy...That is a dead church. The church exists to sustain us and reconcile us, and effect change for the better; to engender the beauty of the greater Good... In short, to Love as God Loves.

My mind began to wander as the meeting began to feel like... well, a meeting. We can’t know much historically about the person of Jesus, I mused....

The gospel stories of Jesus are not corroborated historically... in fact the gospel accounts of Jesus' life are meant to be theological, not historical. But scholars still have been in search for the historical Jesus for a long, long time; and what they have all concluded... from the historian Josephus of the first century, to Albert Schweitzer at the turn of the nineteenth century, to the Jesus seminar of the late twentieth century... They have concluded that there are two, just two historical facts concerning Jesus.... That he was a Wisdom preacher/teacher and healer who hung out in Galilee... and that he was killed by the Romans by crucifixion for the crime of sedition (treason)... So, historically, one thing we know about Jesus is that he was a political activist... That he founded not so much a religion... We did that... He didn't found a religion, he founded a movement.... He stepped on toes... He believed so strongly in the cause of God... The cause of God being the well-being and dignity of all people... that he risked and lost his life for it.... And the cause of God is economic and social, and yes, political... not partisan political, but truly political... meaning, matters as to how we live together as humans justly, how we negotiate our common life, recognizing that we are all made in God's image.... In Luke's gospel Jesus preaches a radical change in the socio-economic system... the poor are raised up while the powerful rich are cast down... that's stepping on toes, right? In Matthew, Jesus makes the audacious claim that to

serve the lost and the least, the outcasts of our world... we are in fact serving him... And here in Mark... Jesus is saying that it is to the powerless that we are sent (children the metaphor)... that to set a stumbling block in the way of the powerless puts us at odds with God's project of reconciliation and salvation. We just heard the over-the-top consequences of being stumbling blocks... "A great millstone tied around our necks and being thrown into the sea." I used to think the great stumbling block of our age, perhaps for every age, was indifference; but now given our current situation in American democracy, I think the great stumbling block is complicity.... I mean complicity with the status quo; complicity with elitism, and white, male privilege.... And complicity with the powerful whom we would presume have the backs of our own self-interest. Self-interest, greed, envy... those are the stumbling blocks of our age. But just who are we to challenge the status quo? Who are we to step on anyone's toes? Peace and justice and righting wrongs just take time, right?

Brothers and sisters we live in a time when the world needs the church, and I don't mean the comfortable church. I mean the prophetic church; and we don't have time to bring people along slowly. There are some things that aren't negotiable for us. The poor and the disenfranchised have been given into our charge. We are to be advocates for them. Those in despair are our responsibility.

We are the ones who tend to the powerless and the lost, and the marginalized. We are the guardians of the dignity of the ones shamed in our world... Those aren't hobbies for some of the more liberal among us... that's our baptismal covenant; and our baptismal vocation is urgent. We say that things are just so complicated. They're not complicated. We live by the rubric of Love and we no longer have the luxury of retreating from the world... We are the ones given for the world's redemption. And speaking of the marginalized... you know, the ones whom we are called to serve.... We are witnessing as we speak the marginalization and abuse of women at the hands of white, male, privileged power. And if we don't speak out for them, who will? If you are in the Jesus movement, and you are, (else you wouldn't be here, right?) then speak for them. Call your senators and congressman. Don't listen anymore politely to racist language, or sexist language. I know that theology evolves, that morality evolves with new knowledge and experience, But y'all, lying is acceptable? We are witnessing the democratic leadership in all three branches of government including the president of the United States lying, plain and simple. That is not O.K.... When someone, anyone speaks or acts contrary to Love, speak up. If you're like me, it is so much easier just to be nice... but the world needs us now.... The

abused and the left out, and the sick, and the incarcerated, and the homeless, and the poor, and the tired, and torn, and the broken need us now.

Jesus is our example... He called out the powers that be... He offered scathing critique of the emperor as well as the civic and religious establishment of his day... He challenged orthodox ways of thinking... he taught and practiced inclusion... He broke bread, drank wine with Roman tax agents and prostitutes and the n'eer-do-wells of his day... His disciples were scapegoated, called unclean... Wherever there was indignity he called for justice... wherever there was illness, he offered healing... he welcomed strangers, embraced with compassion and hospitality the immigrant and refugee... He told stories that upended conventional wisdom... He was in short an activist for God... His edgy preaching was not comfortable but incisive... "I come not to bring peace but a sword," he says. We have made Jesus so very comfortable and nice... We've made Jesus so very safe.... He's not safe.

I have a fantasy about what Jesus might have thought had he somehow appeared at the council of Nicea in the fourth century... a council in which the church fathers were hammering out a neat and clean doctrine about the person of Jesus and his part in the Trinity.... You know: Jesus is God from God, light from

light... begotten not made... of one being with the father... "Seriously!?" I think he would say... I think he would say to the assembly gathered there... "Folks it ain't about me"... It's about taking care of God's people who need taking care of... It's about standing against the evil run rampant in the world... It's about standing against power that abuses and shames... calling it out, and with artful grace offering a way in which we can all live in God's Shalom... that is, at peace with justice, without fear. And there is no time to waste. In our reading from Mark Jesus is making the case for no compromise and urgency. That the time is now to bring the marginalized into the human circle of dignity.

And Jesus even goes further in our reading today... He's not about an exclusive club, or an exclusive religion for that matter... He tells us that whoever is doing good is of God... Get with the program of doing good, he says.... There is no time for tap dancing. The world is ready for the truth... Our identity is to be activists for the truth... activists for a world restored to the beauty God intends for it... and brothers and sisters, if that means stepping on toes... so be it.