

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Jason Fugate

September 26, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. I want to jump right into the Gospel this morning and I know we may have only had one cup of coffee or maybe in the back of your mind you've got the Bears game tossing around but this lesson is pretty jarring though, right? Millstones and eye plucking is not something we normally think about and for good reason. It's hard to imagine Jesus is literally advocating for these kinds of harms.

God loves us as children of God and part of creation. It would take some real convincing to think Jesus is truly advocating for mutilation of the body or harming ourselves as a virtue. In fact, much of Jesus' ministry was spent healing the body, mind, and soul. Jesus brought unity where there was disunity. If we set that literal translation aside for a moment, and no I don't mean go start thinking about coffee, instead we can think about this passage considering our mission in the world. Jesus has just discussed with the disciples a person who was doing ministry but not within the sphere of the disciples. The disciples wanted to stop this person but Jesus insists that this should not be done. "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

Jesus is reminding his disciples that the practice of faith in the world is vitally important. If it is not opposing Jesus and the teachings that he brings, then it works

for the good. Encouraging work between Christians is a great thing, even if they feel they are not a part of the same community.

This connects us to the latter half of the Gospel; Jesus' teachings on sick parts of the body. The body not as our individual physical body but instead, each one of us as the body of Christ. The Spirit brings us into communion together and our spirituality is something we share. We may express it in different ways but we hope to reflect, in all that we do, God's love and grace. We know this will look different in various contexts and communities but our foundation remains the same. We are united as one because of our faith.

You'll learn this about me that I love movies and I often love to use them as illustrations. This unity is something we have deep emotional yearning for. If you've ever seen the movie "We are Marshall" it tells the true story of Marshall University and the time after they suffered a tragic plane crash which left almost all of their football team dead.

The few remaining players are advocating to the school administration to field a team and not give up the program. While it seems there is no hope, Nate Ruffin played by Anthony Mackie, walks over to the window of the crowded conference room overlooking the school and gestures for the administrators to join him.

Hundreds of the Marshall students have gathered outside in support of continuing forward with the football program, chanting in unison "We are Marshall!" I don't have any connection to Marshall University but that moment in the movie still moves me to tears. It captures something deeper in its depiction of the moment. There is hope, hope in what comes of being yoked together, even in tragedy what can come from standing together as one.

This hope is felt so deeply when we truly engage our siblings in Christ. We are one body in Christ, our faith binds us together, and we can do more ministry together than anyone can do alone. All of our skills add to the work of sharing the Gospel, it's for the better these are not exactly the same.

It is tempting to become self-conscious or suspicious when we see others practicing their faith in different ways. When we turn our hearts toward celebrating our different gifts and empower one another, surely, we live into being a united Church. It doesn't mean we all have to come to the same building or listen to the same worship music but we work together to meet each person where they are in their faith journey.

Jesus wants us to encourage working together but he also includes another lesson. When we become ill, we know we don't magically get better. Our illness must be treated. Sometimes our bodies can provide that treatment alone but often times, we need more to recover when we suffer from disease. Jesus recommends in the strongest language that we be truly wary of things that harm the body of Christ. Jesus goes to the most extreme measure to say how important it is to not trip up those who are on their faith journey.

When violence replaces love, intolerance replaces mercy, or when exclusivity replaces welcome, the church works against what Jesus calls us to, the nurturing of our Christian community and faith. We are called to speak out against these ills and model how our faith leads us into love for our neighbor and for creation.

We are called to speak out when we witness these stumbling blocks being laid out and welcome with open arms those who are hurt by them.

These lessons are important ones from Jesus, to encourage work between people of faith and to nurture people on their faith journey instead of being a barrier. Where does this leave us as we continue to consider our relationship with creation?

It's something that we all wrestle with. The destruction of God's creation caused by sin weighs heavy on the hearts of many. We feel downtrodden and the future can feel hopeless. Pastor Jason last week referenced studies that show many young people feel despair when they think about the ways our environment is being damaged and what that means for the future.

I think in our culture, we can feel fed up with platitudes and inaction. Our instinct is to look for action. Where can we be the catalyst for a tangible change? I want to make a meaningful difference right NOW. When we hold that tension of despair, it is important to go back to the source of our hope.

James writes about prayer in our lesson and how powerful it can be. We know that prayer is not like a slot machine. A coin can't just be put in and hope that a reward comes out. No, prayer brings us deeper into our spirituality and closer in relationship with Christ. Those spiritual disciplines and practices have great and lasting power, as they inform the way we interact with the world around us.

We have many different kinds of spiritual practices that speak to us as individuals but they bring us into a space where we can be in deeper community with Christ, Creation, and one another. These disciplines can offer us a sense of radical hope, that our God is bigger than any challenge the world creates. That hope STILL abounds.

No matter where you are in your prayer life, I challenge you to hold a moment this week and pray for creation and for hope. That the structures of power can be

moved to protect creation from destruction. That those who feel despair about the future find hope. That both guilt from inaction and overwhelming stress from action be cast out. That the sun will rise and set again on a world yearning to be filled with love and peace.

Please pray with me. Lord, we come to you and remember. Remember how important it is to be reflective and to sit with you. We ask for guidance but let this be a time merely to receive this. Allow us to sense the connective tissue, You, who binds us together in love. Bring us solace and rest in a world so desperately in need of care. When we go out from these times with You, keep us in the knowledge and feeling of Your unending mercy and grace. God, go with us into the world, yearning to be in harmony once again and pouring ourselves into the relationships we have now and the hope for all the things to come. Amen.