

20B 2021

Jesus' disciples always give me so much hope, but perhaps not in the way they would have wanted.

I draw inspiration from the fact that they got it wrong so consistently, yet Jesus never rejects them.

That being the case, I think, there is hope for me, too.

Openness to everyone is, in fact, a central aspect of Jesus' message.

He never rejects people who approach him in sincerity.

As Jesus says in the gospel of John, "anyone who comes to me I will never drive away."

Young or old, Jewish or gentile, rich or poor, he welcomes them all.

It is they who reject *him*, they who use *him*.

People come to him for healing, for example, yet have no interest in his message of renewal of life, his invitation to a relationship of responsible love.

"Heal me so that I can get back to living exactly as I always did."

This is why, in today's gospel, Jesus does not want people to know that he is passing through Galilee.

If the locals find out, they will swarm him for healing, and he will have no time to teach his disciples as he intends.

Notice that Jesus never teaches that we must believe a certain doctrine, but that we should have faith in him and in God.

He invites us to relate to people and to God in a certain way.

Specifically, we are to set aside hierarchy, cast off the need to be superior, and be the servant of all.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. . . . Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

An open invitation to all is central to his teaching.

It is the message he consistently delivers in the gospels, yet the disciples fail to grasp it.

He realizes this when he finally gets some alone time to speak to them about personal matters, about his death and resurrection, and they are distracted by concern over who among them is the greatest.

He discovers, in other words, that the disciples are still lost in a world of hierarchy in which they feel they must prove themselves.

They still have not grasped God’s unconditional love of everyone.

Like the disciples, it takes all of us time to grasp Jesus’ central message.

Like the disciples, along the way, we might feel the need to convince ourselves that we are greater than others, but God is impressed only by our willingness to build relationships of trust.

God prefers humility over superiority; cooperation over competition.

When we fail to grasp that God loves us, as James points out, conflicts and disputes arise from cravings that are at war within us, as happened to the disciples on the road through Galilee.

When we are not confident of God's love, we feel lost, empty, threatened, which leads to greed and other forms of vanity.

We feel the need to prove ourselves, prove our worth, to demonstrate to others that we are significant.

We now have a group of billionaires trying to outdo each other in space.

No matter how far they project themselves into the ether, they will be no closer to God than the people they left behind, no more loved than the people who remain on earth.

These men are unaware that they have nothing to prove, that they are the blessed children of God, already an integral part of the universe.

Those who are confident of God's love, on the other hand, feel no need to prove anything.

They love God; God loves them.

Nothing more need be said.

Their deeds promote peace and harmony.

In *God's* economy, no one is excluded.

If we desire to be in relationship with God, God honors that.

The rest follows.

As James explains, when we know this, our works will be done with gentleness.

“The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”

When we know that God loves us, that God would never reject us, our whole attitude changes.

When we do not know this, on the other hand, we display bitter envy and selfish ambition in our hearts.

We become “boastful and false to the truth,” by which James means false to the truth that God loves us, cherishes us.

At this point, you may well be wondering, if there is no worthiness test, if God never turns away *anyone* who comes to God, then why have theologians and clergy

convinced us that if we are not good enough, if we do not reach a certain level of perfection, we will not be accepted into God's grace?

Simply put, why have we been told that some will be cast into an eternal hell, that only those who have the right theology or the right religion please God enough to gain admission to heaven?

People have got the cart before the horse.

Jesus' original message was that he would turn no one away who wanted to be in relationship with him.

Those who refuse that relationship, who prefer power or rank or wealth, condemn *themselves* to the outer darkness far from God by rejecting God's love.

Notice the amount of fear that is injected into the corrupt version of this theology—that we have to be sufficiently worthy or God will not love us and will condemn us to hell.

Be aware that people introduce fear unnecessarily to control us.

They want us to believe that we need to prove ourselves because they then set the parameters by which our worth is measured.

Along the way, the church became an institution of social control and lost touch with the heart of Jesus' message.

It gave people permission to see themselves as superior.

Christians have even killed those of other religions, killed God's beloved children, "to prevent them from sinning."

The result of this destructive theology is that many became unable to feel God's love.

It is for us to resurrect Jesus' message in our hearts and lives.

"Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away."

God rejects no one who wants to be with God.

No one.

When we internalize this truth, we act with humble wisdom.