

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Don't tell the bishop, but my Episcopal pedigree isn't very good. I attended Lutheran college and seminary, and so I'm sure that Lutheran thinking has stayed with me in my preaching and my teaching. They have terrible potluck food, but they've also contributed some insights into reading scripture that I think about to this day.

Martin Luther, writing five hundred years ago, taught that all of scripture could be divided into two categories — the Law and the Gospel. So, when you read that you may not commit adultery, then you are reading the Law. When you read that you will be loved by God even if you do commit adultery, then you are reading the Gospel. The Law is the stick; the Gospel is the carrot. And, if Lutherans are right about this, Christians ride the tension between these two states, knowing that the Gospel will win out in the end. The Law says we die. The Gospel says that death is not the end of the story.

I find this an interesting way to think about scripture. And it hit me pretty powerfully on this week's reading that there was a large dose of the Law that comes to us in the passage from Proverbs this morning.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

I had to do a double-take when I read this because it seems that God is saying that if you are cruel to the poor, God will be cruel to you. Think about that for a moment. That does not seem like the kind of thing that we would see in Sunday school or plastered somewhere on a church banner to be hung in our worship space. And it rubs right against the notions of an all good, all benevolent God.

So, what are thinking Christian people supposed to do with a passage such as this one? I think it is scary to think that God is in the business of smiting. That seems downright medieval. But for the moment, I wonder what it would be like to take it with deadly seriousness?

I don't know about you, but I grew up in an era when I heard a lot about the kinds of people God would smite. And it usually had to do with things a person might do in the privacy of their own home. And it usually had something to do with bodies, particularly women's bodies.

But over and over in the Biblical narrative, what we hear instead is that the thing that makes God really steaming mad is cruelty to the poor. But when we talk about the things that make God mad in popular culture, we almost always talk about sex.

So, why is that? Why the misdirection?

I think it is because at some level we know that, in our society, we have made many, many decisions that would make God angry. Think about the ways that our highway systems always seem to cut through poor neighborhoods rather than wealthy ones. Think about the heat advisories last week and the ways that the suburban school had air conditioning and the urban schools didn't. This is about the ways that the very poorest countries on earth have nearly no access to vaccinations while the richest countries have vaccine stockpiled.

And this story is as old as time. It is why the Bible was talking about it 2500 years ago. The real scandals aren't in bedrooms. They are out in the public eye where we all can see them. But, frankly, talking about the bedroom is a dodge.

God tells us that if we despise the poor, we will ourselves be despised. My first instinct is to imagine some kind of lightning bolt coming down from heaven whenever we make a collective decision that disadvantages the already disadvantaged.

But I'm not sure it looks like that on the ground. Instead, I think what happens is that once we decide that a certain group of people can be treated as things, then all of life becomes less sacred, less holy. The way that we've treated the global south — both the people and the land — seems to be coming back to bite us in a big way. Climate disasters and refugee crises nearly every day on the news. Our willingness to stay intentionally blind to injustice around us requires us to believe that all life is a little bit less holy than it is. To decide that the other person is not holy and worthy of a good life diminishes us all. I don't think that we see lightning bolts from God. I think instead we see a whole planet diminished by our callous regard for the poor.

The Law says that when we treat the poor as things, the whole world suffers. So then, where is the Gospel in all of this? Where is the Good News for a world that seems to choose the needs of the powerful over the needs of the powerless?

I see the Good News in two places. One is in the example of Jesus. Jesus goes into neighborhoods that we might be tempted to avoid. He eats with people we might not consider

eating with. And he challenges secular and religious rulers so that we do not get too proud of our own good deeds.

I also see the Gospel in the way that hardened hearts can actually be changed in fundamental ways by God. I see young people in and out of the church who are deeply committed to the ways that care for the earth, care for the poor, and care for sexual minorities, women, and children are all related and necessary for a thriving society. I see a whole generation of people completely uninterested in the bedroom politics of twenty-five years ago and who are instead turning their attention to building just relationships and supportive networks. They probably wouldn't call it this, but to my mind, they are building up the body of Christ.

And so, even though, at our worst, we have the capacity for cruelty. The Gospel says that God hasn't given up on us just yet. And it goes even further: the Gospel says that when two or three people come together God will be present. And with that kind of power in our midst, I don't see how we can fail to be a blessing to this weary world. The law says that fire, death, sickness, war, and disaster will inherit this world. But the Gospel that we confess here in this room says that the reign of God will overcome even the scariest headlines in the news. And we are, as ever, people of the Gospel. Amen.