



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens

Proper 26 Year B September 26, 2021

Episcopal Visit to St. John the Baptist, Sardis

It is so great to be with you at St. John's this morning. Wonderful to be able to worship in person with a number of you, even with the precautions and protocols we have in place. What an extraordinary 19 months we have had and even though some things are a little easier at the moment there is still the dark cloud hanging over us isn't there. There is light at the end of the tunnel but we are not quite there yet. I am so grateful, so incredibly grateful that we are able to have some in-person worship at this time and hopefully that will continue to grow and expand as we move forward. Thank you for this opportunity to be with a number of you to pray and sing and share in the Eucharist.

I am so grateful to your Rector, Al, for the amazing job that he has done as your parish priest. He is a very capable person isn't he. Much talent and skill as a pastor, preacher and priest. I am also so grateful for all that he does in the diocese. As an archdeacon, as part of the Dismantling Racism group and in a number of other areas. The role of archdeacon demands a lot of time and expertise and patience. Al has been an excellent archdeacon, as I am sure I don't need to tell you. I am very appreciative of him. Thank you for sharing some of his time and expertise with the wider diocesan family. Your deacon, Larry offers his many talents as well and With Al and your deacon, Larry, you are in very good hands as a parish. They have guided and supported you so well despite the last 19 months of pandemic.

And so here with are, with the Bible readings appointed for this day. So let's consider them for a little while.

It was a fascinating Gospel reading didn't you think? Such strong and challenging words. There was no sitting on the sidelines and just going through the motions with Jesus this morning. NO. Strong, clear, direct, right to the point. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out... Wow this is not half-hearted commitment at all. Do you think he meant it? Do you think he wanted his followers to be this determined to limp and be bandaged up to see and welcome the Kingdom of God in their midst? He did, of that there is no doubt... but of course not literally. He didn't expect us to lose a hand or a foot or an eye but he did expect us to give all that we have and all that we are to the furtherment of the Kingdom in this world. To knock us off a course that only nods in agreement to his words of Blessed are the poor or Blessed are the meek and instead cuts deeply and directly to the core of what life is all about. To push aside all those things that are just fluff and get real and get grounded in God's designs for our lives.

And of course this got me thinking... and I started to turn it around and notice that Jesus recognized that there were many limping, half blind, hurting, disregarded, disillusioned people, listening to his words of long ago. People who had been battered and scarred by the world and lost hope in the eternal and life-giving presence of God. Many who had known violence or suffering or simply an inner turmoil that did not seem to heal that caused them be broken and crushed by this world. And this is just as true for us, maybe even more so in this pandemic. Limping, half blind people in this world who are searching for something deeper and more purpose filled. I think that so many of us, and I would add my name to this list, who do not always affirm and celebrate and show gratitude for the gift of this life. We get caught up in other things and so do not see some things that are right under our noses. Things like wonder and beauty and holiness and the Holy Spirit and the presence of God in our midst. Things like joy and purpose and calling and hope. Things like deep appreciation, transforming faith in the one who calls us beloved. Things like forgiveness, deep forgiveness for those things that continue to weigh us down and drown out the voice urging us to draw nearer. Things like recognizing the image of God in ourselves and all other limping and half-blind people like those pushed to the periphery of life, the burdened, the forgotten in this world.

I read recently an article written by Esau McCauley with the rather evocative title, *We Weren't Happy Before the Pandemic Either*. Dr. McCauley notes that the pandemic has forced us or caused us or invited us to consider our collective mortality head on. It has brought it into sharp focus. And so he writes, "And now we are faced with the question of meaning. Like the biblical psalmist says, 'We have escaped like a bird from the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped.' (*Psalms* 124:7). COVID-19 threatened to capture us in its snare, but thus far we have eluded it. What shall we do with this opportunity?

"This opportunity made plain what may have been hidden. Maybe the sacrifices we make for our career are not worth it. When we had the illusion of time, the lower pay, long commutes, high cost of living and separation from loved ones seemed a small price to pay for a successful

career. But the pandemic reminded us that there are some things more important than vocational progress....

“The pandemic has reminded us that life is more than what we do. It is about whom we spend our lives with. We cannot hug a career or laugh with a promotion. We are made for friendship, love and community.”¹

I think that this is closely related to what Jesus was saying in the gospel passage for today. If your hand or your foot or your eye causes you to stumble cut it off. And all of us, every one of us have things that cause us to stumble, to trip up, to fail to see what God hopes and prays for us. And Jesus is saying that it is better to limp half blind into the kingdom of God than to be blind to seeing it and living it in this world. You see the kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about so often was not only referring to life after death. Yes, there is eternal life, the resurrection of Jesus after his death on the cross speaks to that and guarantees that. But we are also called to live in this world aware of something much greater and grander and grace-filled than what so much of life calls us into and that is the kingdom of heaven here and now. To notice and see that this world despite our limping or blindness or unawareness of the potential of our own two hands, our own two feet, to see and know that this world is alive with the presence of God. We can see the fingerprints of God all over and within all and around all. There is a pervasive love that enwraps us, surrounds us, blesses us despite us so often not even seeing or noticing. And that pervasive love is calling us to be different people.

In this season of Creation in the Church, we are being asked to look at the world differently. To not simply take it for granted but to see it is as a gift. To not simply seek ways to exploit this world but to give thanks to God for the beauty, the wonder, the joy. To not simply see where a profit can be made but look much more deeply about how we care for this planet that is our home but to care for it as a gift from God and with good stewardship; that sees we are called to walk lightly in this world as a sign of our faith in the God who is the source of all we see and know, touch and taste. To see that as this planet heats up more and more it is the poorest of people who will be impacted most, the forgotten, the ignored, the ones Jesus spent so much time with. To see that we are called live our faith in a way that is not just about healing our limping feet but discovering a new way to see. To link science and faith and to see that in every aspect of life, understood or not, God walks with us. To discover this kingdom of God in this world and in this time and in this place. A kingdom that is filled with a grace that we are called to share and demonstrate; not with limping and half blinded sight but with new hands and new eyes.

Ted Loder is the author of a number of prayer poems. This is part of one that seems to speak to this gospel passage for today:

Lord of laughter, as of tears,

Shake me awake

And teach me to laugh at myself, at my black-draped solemnity,

Over my petty preoccupation with success and failure,

¹ *We Weren't Happy Before the Pandemic*, Either by Esau McCauley in *The New York Times* August 21, 2021

Through all the hurt and adversity
Until my laughter lures me deep
Beneath the terrors without names,
Beneath the questions without answers,
Beneath the pain without relief;
Lures me deep to the love in me unused
To the strength unspent
To the courage untapped
To the dream unrisked,
To the beauty unexpressed;
All the way down to the inescapable bottom,
To the awareness that I must get on
With being who I am as fully as I can,
As unflinchingly as I can, as accurately as I can,
Which is to say, as gracefully, as powerfully, as faithfully
As you created me to be.

May you hear and know Jesus' final words in the gospel passage this day with new ears, new eyes, new hands, new feet: Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.