

OUTSIDE THE GATE?
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The Seventh Sunday of Easter
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Last night, Mark and I were talking through my struggles with today's readings and I was working through my doubts with him and sort of riffing on what was happening within each reading. I was struck by several things; first and foremost was that I had absolutely no "in" to these readings. Like, at all. I dutifully went to all my usual sources, looked into commentary and EFM readings, looked for footnotes to the specific passages in my Bible. Pulled out all my EFM-adjacent readings from radical pastors and folks whose version of Christianity more aligns with my borderline heretic views.

The truth is, I am sad. Terribly, terribly sad and I just cannot reconcile the world we're in now to that hope for the world described here, especially in the Gospel of John.

I have to say, these last several weeks have brought me down, this week in particular. And, as a result, I am having a truly epic fight to find any meaningful things to say about these highly selective—and highly edited—readings for the Seventh Sunday of Easter. In some Christian traditions, this Sunday marks Christ's Ascension into heaven. Jesus my man, where are you?

In the lectionary, we are in an in-between state. The liturgical time after Christ's death on the cross and Pentecost, which is next Sunday. Then, the Holy Spirit arrives to keep Jesus' message alive to all who would hear his word, since he has left the earthly realm. It was now up to the early church—and now us through his word—to carry on and spread his Gospel of love, inclusion, acceptance, and forgiveness.

Let's start with today's reading from Acts: we have a *really* long narrative about Paul and Silas, moving through Philippi. They are followed by a slave girl who is essentially a carnival geek telling fortunes for gullible souls. She is good at it. She follows Paul and Silas around, basically providing free advertising for their mission proclaiming they are "slaves for the most high God offering a way to salvation." Which is exactly what they are doing. But something snaps in Paul and, greatly annoyed, he rears on her and casts the "demon" out of her. Some scholars believe Paul is annoyed because she is implying there are *other gods* and just preaching for the "Most High" god, or Paul takes umbrage at her comments about their "enslavement" to God, or that they offer A way instead of THE way.

To which I say—who cares? She disappears immediately and is never heard from in any of the subsequent passages. It is surmised that her owners are upset at their lost income, but they don't use that argument with the magistrate. They say, "These men are disturbing our city: they are Jews and advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or serve." Which is funny because these men are essentially carnival barkers. Hardly paragons of Roman virtue.

As it always happens for Paul, they are seized, beaten, and put deep into the bowels of the prison. Fast forward, the earthquake: they don't leave the cell, they stop the jailer from killing himself. The jailer takes them to his house, dresses their wounds, and feeds them. Paul successfully brings the jailer and his family to the word of the Lord, and they rejoice. Exactly as he had done with Lydia in last week's passage.

For me, this narrative is kind of a long walk to nowhere. The very next verse, not included here, is that the next morning they come before the magistrate and Paul has a "Law and Order" episode reveal that he and Silas are, in fact, Roman citizens. The magistrates are cowed because they have unlawfully imprisoned Roman citizens and they could be in deep trouble. So, they agree to say nothing more about it and Paul and Silas are allowed to go on their way. "We'll let you go and you'll not get us in trouble with the Roman guard." This is self-protection. Those magistrates show no remorse or acknowledgement that they twisted the law to begin with. It was ever thus.

After these many verses, the message is that Paul has essentially planted a new church in Philippi, bringing the word of God through Christ Jesus to a cloth merchant and a jailer. This very church survives two millennia hence. It's the precursor of where we sit today.

Reading the Book of Revelation passage annoyed me to no end because it excised some key passages and created a very clunky narrative. It is *literally* the last chapter of the entire New Testament and the creators of the Lectionary (and who can I call about this?) left out verses 15, 18, and 19.

In verse 15, which is not included here, John the Revelator acknowledges the world is really messed up: "Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolators, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood." This is really important because it says boldly that these ways of being are present, are always present, and are right outside the gate. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that many of those to whom John is speaking were already saved. And it is not a big leap to say they (we) are not much different than those on the other side before finding our own faith. But here, those dogs and fornicators listed are not worthy of redemption.

John goes further in verses 18 and 19, also cut from the lectionary: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophesy of this book: If anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book and if anyone takes away from the words of this book of this prophesy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." I see that passage and I cannot help but think how often the Bible has been weaponized... how often, under the banner of Heaven and Christianity, unspeakable things have flourished and been justified through those very verses.

In the very last sentence, "Come, Lord Jesus, the Grace of the Lord Jesus be with you and all the saints. Amen." Some ancient translations have this passage end with "...Lord Jesus **be with you all,**" others, "be with **all the Saints,**" and yet another says only, "be with **the Saints.**" Looks like somebody edited this book. And the way it is framed here in the lectionary makes it too easy to see **only ourselves** as the righteous. And it negates the fact that we are **in community**, and that people supported us and shared in our Christian journey.

I think—no, **I hope**—God isn't done with the fornicators and the dogs. And if we're not the dogs, then we have to find compassion for them. In the wake of tragedy and sorrow, I am not there yet. I know that "hurt people hurt people" and that the perpetrators of these most recent atrocities were deeply, deeply disturbed angry young men. I want to find compassion but when I think of all those little bodies... I just can't right now. It is easy to lose faith. To lose hope. And I struggle with it every day. Especially when I know nothing will be done.

John's Gospel puts us at the table with Jesus and the disciples. Judas has left the room and Jesus takes this moment—his last moments as a free man and his last few hours of his earthly life—to stop teaching them and to simply pray. He prays on behalf of those present at the table, but also for their future work, and, by extension, he prays for us here, now, in our lives as we try to continue the work he's laid out before **every** Christian seeker. "So that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one."

That is such a beautiful construct. He continues: "...Father, the world does not know you, *but I know* you and *these know* that you have sent me...so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them."

I've stood here many times basically saying this over and over; that **God is within us all**. We have an opportunity every day to see him in others, and by doing so we affirm God's presence in the world. In our everyday lives, we get the opportunity to care for others, and, hopefully, to let them know that they too are worthy and loved and not as alone and unseen as they might believe they are.

I have to believe that what happened in these two recent shootings is that both gunmen lost any sense of God being anywhere near them. Maybe they thought they were beyond redemption, maybe they thought they **were** God. I don't know and I don't care right now. The result is the same.

Why? If God is in us -- why the hell does this keep happening?

Because their rage so consumed them, was **so completely and only** about them and their pain. Their self-focus blocked all empathy, or any sense of the impact of their actions; and it allowed these warped young men to reduce their victims to "it." Because that is where they were themselves. Disconnected, alone in their twisted revenge fantasies. How else could someone pull those guns out of their car to begin with? These are people who have lost their very souls, swallowed whole by an ideology, fed a steady diet that reinforced a belief twisted and perfectly engineered to reach deep into the most insecure and deeply wounded hearts. Lonely, troubled young men, their abject loss of self—weaponized to create deadly mayhem, headlines and clicks.

These gunmen were in the world. There were people around them who may have noticed something was "up" and didn't know what to do... or felt it was above their abilities to deal with. But we're seeing the assailants in the aftermath of horrific acts. What happened all the years before? Could there have been a moment—no, many moments—in either of their lives when someone could have noticed them, seen them, felt their unrest? It's wishful thinking here, I know. But these two men were **literally outside** the gate described in Revelation and no one was going to let them in. That's what I mean about the editing. **No one** gets in without another's help, reaching out as Jesus taught us to do. It is easy to overlook, we think "well, I'd never do that". Of course, you wouldn't. Look at the support system we have here in these pews.

But it's hard—really, really hard—to reach out to people so troubled.

I realize I am a bit of a downer here, so I'll close with this quote from Nadia Bolz Weber, a pastor and writer to whom I turn often to help me make sense of things I just cannot reconcile. Here is a quote from her book: *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. She is talking about the times when her spirituality is most active, and I am paraphrasing here:

My spirituality is most active not in meditation, but in the moments when: I realize God may have gotten something beautiful done through me despite the fact that I am <a jerk>, and when I am confronted with the mercy of the Gospel so much that I cannot hate my enemies, and when I am unable to judge the sin of someone else (which, let's be honest, I love to do) because my own crap is too much in the way, and when I have to bear witness to another human being's suffering despite my desire to be left alone, and when I am forgiven by someone even when I don't deserve it and my forgiver does this because he too is trapped by the Gospel, and when traumatic things happen in the world and I have nowhere to place them or make sense of them. But what I do have is a group of people who gather with me every week, people who will mourn and pray with me over the devastation of something like a school shooting, and when I end up changed by loving someone I would never choose out of a catalog, but whom God sends my way to teach me about God's love.

Here's to the people whom God sends our way. May we treat them with dignity and respect, no matter how we might be feeling in that moment.

Thank you for listening.

Amen.