

19th Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 21B
September 30, 2018

St Mark 9:38-50

Looking for Loopholes

Pierre Trudeau, the late Prime Minister of Canada, was once asked an indelicate question about the lifestyle of his much younger wife. "A gentleman does not answer such questions," was his reply. Then, staring down the reporter, Pierre Trudeau added, "a gentleman does not *ask* such questions." Wow, take that! But Trudeau was right. A proper gentleman does not ask indelicate questions and they never raise indelicate issues.

If only Jesus were such a gentleman, we would have been spared all the indelicate words of this morning's Gospel. Surely, no person raised with good manners would have been so rude as to talk the way Jesus does in Mark 9. Imagine being at a dinner event and someone at the table suddenly declared, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have both eyes and be thrown into hell." Now, really, isn't that a little over the top of Jesus? Does he really have any business bring all that up? For that matter, are those really the options in life, that we either mutilate ourselves or go to hell?

No wonder Jesus' ministry was not doing too well. In light of these outrageous demands it's no surprise that his ministry was none too popular. No wonder they killed him; who wants to risk having Jesus show up at your house and offend all the guests by saying things like, "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off?" Whatever happened to the Jesus who promised Good News, anyway?

As it happens, Jesus has a very bad track record where making impossible demands is concerned. Remember Jesus' words about riches? He said, "It is easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." What are we to do with that? Does Jesus really mean no one who is rich - however we define that - can be a Christian or go to heaven? How are we to deal with this and all the other outrageous claims that Jesus makes?

Here's how most of us deal with Jesus' words. We try to find the loopholes; we look for escape clauses so we can avoid his impossible demands. We do what St Jerome did back in the 4th century when he looked at Jesus' statement about a camel going through the eye of a needle. Jerome made up the idea that back in the time of Jesus there must have been a tiny, tiny little gate leading into the city of Jerusalem that was called the Eye of the Needle. And here's where his explanation gets really good: if a camel tried really, really hard and scrunched

itself up, it would just be able to squeeze through that gate. Phew! Amazing! So, if a rich person tries as hard as those camels from long ago, the rich person can just barely squeeze into the kingdom of God. The great part about using Jerome's explanation is that we have a loophole: we can avoid Jesus' ridiculous demands.

Another good thing about Jerome's loophole is that if we try hard enough we can actually fulfill Jesus' demands. Perhaps the church should adopt Avis' Rent-a-Car slogan and say "We try harder!" we will do anything to avoid Jesus' demands. We rationalize them, we literalize them, we turn them into metaphors, we resort to works righteousness, we look for loopholes and all to no avail.

But Jesus won't let us get away with that. So long as we continue to fool ourselves that we can meet all Jesus' demands, Jesus just keeps upping the ante. Such as with this morning's words about cutting off our hands and feet and plucking out our eyes. But even supposing we took Jesus literally and cut off all our limbs, would that really earn us God's love and grace? No, because sin comes from inside of us. No amount of limb-cutting can save us from sin.

And besides, if we really tried to do what Jesus demands, we would kill ourselves. If we really dismembered ourselves the way he suggests, we'd be dead. Which is exactly the point. The demands of God's law always render us dead in our works. Like Raid that kills bugs dead, the law kills us dead.

All along, Jesus' impossible demands have been pushing us to this realization. There is nothing we can do to attain salvation. Nothing. Period. Jesus' words, by their uncompromising impossibility push us, pursue us, and hound us until they corner us and trap us. Like Sherlock Holmes chasing down a criminal, Jesus' words chase us. They pursue us until they get the confession, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength come to know Jesus Christ my Lord or believe in him." But in making this confession, we finally arrive at the Good News.

In fact, it's the only way to get the Good News. It's been there all along. Jesus' offer of salvation, his grace, his benefits have all been there. All that is needed is our confession that we can't do it by ourselves. That's all we have to say when confronted with his impossible demands. When we say, "I can't do it," he responds, "But I can. And will." That's what we call grace. When we fear that Jesus' demands could literally kill us, he reminds us that he took on that same death to give us life. Jesus may not be the perfect gentleman, but he is something far, far more important: Our Lord and Savior, the One to whom we turn for the words of eternal life. Amen.