

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Street

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

Sunday, September 30, 2018

Proper 21 (B)

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

DRAFT

“Radical Surgery”

8 and 10 AM Sermons

by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 9:38-50

John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you

if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies,

and the fire is never quenched. For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Lord, create in us clean hearts and sustain us with your Holy Spirit. Amen.

I recall a priest friend of mine in Canada whom I had known at St. Bartholomew's Church in Manhattan before he was ordained. He was

diagnosed with cancer of his throat and had to have radical surgery which removed most of his vocal chords and part of his jaw and face. In that condition one would expect the person to be morose, regretful, and sad, but he was the cheeriest person I had ever known.

He was so grateful for the years of life he would have before him, for his wife, and for his ministry to his surgeons, and nurses and staff at that hospital, and at other hospitals where he continued to serve as a chaplain for several years.

Possibly one of the most profound

disabilities of a preacher is to lose his voice, but my friend, though he did not completely lose his voice, it just became very light and high pitched, he used the voice he had to encourage others undergoing various radical surgeries, and to support the surgeons and doctors who carried out the necessary procedures to extend the lives of their severely ill patients. It seems God is not ready to let us go until God is good and ready to let us move from this life. And God can use whatever remnants we have to God's greater glory.

These issues are perhaps more upon us in this modern time when many cancers and deformities can be healed at least partially if not totally. We are the beneficiaries of decades of medical research and practice and experience. We are indeed living in a very gifted time.

One of my acquaintances had to have an eye removed, but he began living a better life, found happiness, and moved to a more pleasant place. He was given God's grace when others would have counted him out completely after a life

of alcoholism and severe childhood abuse. The grace of God never leaves us. The world may try to overcome us as children or adults, but our faith becomes a secure anchor for our lives if we choose to use it.

Linda Petracelli, now a minister in the United Church of Christ, recalls her time spent in a Roman Catholic school as a child. One of Linda's teachers, Sister Mary Roberts Cecelia, one day told the students how everyone who was not Catholic was going to hell, especially Lutherans and Episcopalians. Later that

day when little Linda got home her mother asked her, “What are you thankful for today, dear?” Thoughtfully, little Linda answered, “Today I am thankful Sister Mary Roberts Cecelia is not God.” However, I have heard just the opposite story told by protestants about how their brothers and sisters in the Roman church are destined for hades. And most all of us have our favorite denominations to condemn, for whatever reason. But to paraphrase what little Linda Petracelli told her mother, ‘we are glad that those other people are not God.’

And we perhaps agree that we, too, are not the Holy One hallowed in Heaven. None of us are infallible. The one law of the universe that is more dependable than the law of gravity is that the universe is not perfect; the law of imperfection overarches all the other laws of nature; no thing nor anyone is perfect either, except God, and we often challenge God, don't we? What we try to learn from our interactions with each other is not to focus on how different we are, but how similar we are. We are all human, yet our gifts and insights are often quite

different. But in God's wisdom, God has made us each to be important to everyone else, whether we always feel that way or not towards our neighbor. The law of love, Christ tells us, is a heavenly law which overcomes the universe's law of imperfection. Can I have an Amen? [Oh, "we" don't do that 'Amen' thing.]

I recall a fund-raising dinner we held at my previous church; it was our tercentenary, our 300th birthday; we were seventy years older than the United States, founded by English missionaries

in 1706. We had invited our diocesan bishop to our grand celebration, and when the bishop looked out over the somewhat hodge-podge of folks there, he quietly said to me, “Joe, I don’t see how you will be able to raise any funds from these people.” And I confided in him, those who are eating are being served by those who will be giving. And that was the case. Those who serve may often be those who give. But we cannot stereotype anyone based on a visual inspection or anything else. Welcome all who come to eat at the Lord’s Table.

And think of them just as highly or perhaps more so than we think of ourselves. There is no one we cannot learn from. We have our own light within that we are not to hide under a barrel. But remember we are not the only candle on God's birthday cake.

My sense is that God accepts us as we are, and then works to change us into the people we can become with God's help. It is as though God is a sculptor and we are the sculptees. As Michelangelo could "see" David in the block of rock before he carved David's figure, God

sees in each of us the person God wants us to be and then puts a lot of effort in making us into what we are to become.

Writer King Duncan asks, what portions of our lives need editing? What in our past do we need to edit when telling our story? Have we always taken time for God? Have we always taken time for our loved ones, our spouses and children? What about other children in our church? Do we reach out to the helpless and the homeless?

Patrick Wilson tells of reading a carved inscription above a church

doorway in London: “O God, make the door of this house wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship, narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife. Make the threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children, nor straying feet, but rugged and strong enough to turn back the tempter’s power. God make the door of this house the gateway to thine eternal kingdom.”

There is a story told of a person who was visited by two members of a local church one Sunday afternoon. The

person announced, “I do not believe in organized religion.” To which the church visitors replied, “Good. You’ll love our church. We’ve been trying to get our church organized for the past 26 years, and it hasn’t happened yet.”

Harvey Cox, a former Harvard Divinity School professor, in his book, “Turning East”, concluded that the strength of Christianity lies in the congregation, the group of gathered Christians. Professor Cox says, “To grow spiritually one must apprentice [themselves] to a struggling little church

in [their area], a place where [one] must contend with younger and older people some of whose views I appreciate and others whose ideas I find intolerable.

The music is sometimes stirring, sometimes off key. The preaching is uneven. There is never enough money for the [utilities and repairs].... How often have I been tempted to jettison this all-too-human freckle on the Body of Christ and stay home with better music (on the stereo) and better theology (on the bookshelf). “But,” Professor Cox says, “I do not [stay home]. A voice

within me keeps reminding me that I need these fallible [fellow parishioners], whose petty complaints never quite overshadow the love and concern underneath.... This precious little local church...is where the Word [of God] becomes flesh.... I do not believe any modern Christian...can survive without some such grounding in a local congregation,” Professor Cox concludes.

The late Mother Theresa said, “We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if that drop were not in the ocean, I think the ocean

would be less because of the missing drop.”

The Revd Nicky Gumbel, Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Brompton Road in London, tells the story of how a test was done to show how people ‘go along with the crowd’. His illustration was that a psychology professor wanted to demonstrate the power of group persuasion by using ten students. Nine of the students were instructed to say that a line which was clearly shorter than other lines was the same length as the other lines. The tenth student was

brought in and when that student was shown the lines and asked if any one was shorter than the others, nine students said no, that all the lines were the same length—they voted by holding up their hands. The tenth student looked amazed at the other students and slowly raised his hand to agree that all the lines were of equal length. The professor reported that this experiment was carried out several times, and of all the ‘tenth’ students, only twenty-five percent would disagree with the nine conspirators. This demonstrated the power of group

persuasion, the professor said. However, as I reflected on hearing this story several times, I wondered if the premise of the test were flawed. The problem appears to me that nine students could be ‘instructed’ to conspire against the tenth student, and that all nine agreed to be in this conspiracy. The tenth student was reacting to the unknown conspiracy, but the problem with the test was that nine students could be found again and again and again to agree to conspire against an outsider. So this turns the tables on the nine, and on the instructor, who

conspired to agree on an untruth. This seems to be part of the problem which has raised its evil head in parts of society, including the church: that a majority have followed an authority figure and agreed to conspire in an untruth against another, for whatever reason. And in this instance, rather than the one who was the object of the ruse, the ‘rusers’ are the ones at fault, and often they are led by some authority figure. The challenge we face in modern society is to determine who are the rusers and who is being rused. We have a legal

system in which twelve jurors can convict a person; sometimes it seems on later inspection that eleven have agreed on an outcome, and the twelfth who opposed is often squelched or subdued. And the justice that is carried out is thus incomplete and may be terribly flawed. In Roman times, a whole coliseum could be swayed by the emperor to condemn a person, even when those being condemned were saints. Group decisions can be flawed at the very best; groups have no inherent 'holiness'. So, our challenge is how to 'right the wrongs'?

Hopefully, the centuries it took to stop the coliseum slaughters will not be laid at our feet as evidence against us in God's eyes in modern times; yet we are vulnerable always to accept the decision of the many.

All the disciples abandoned their Lord on the cross, and Peter was the ring leader of the denial of his Lord. Yet, Jesus challenged Peter to feed his sheep, care for his lambs and feed them to show Peter really loved his Lord.

What we can gather out of the gospel tradition is that God will overcome even

the unanimous majority when push comes to shove. God indeed raised his Son on the third day, regardless of the unbelief of all the disciples. And history proves that many saints' lives were sacrificed by unanimous agreement of those who improperly put on the judgmental mantle of holiness and godliness. But God will never be fooled, and God's judgments are indeed final. Let us listen to God's voice, knowing that only the Holy One will ever be... 'right'.

Amen.

PS – ‘being welcoming is not just about the pastor or church workers but the culture of a congregation. Shortly after Central <> Church had adopted its welcome statement and put a framed copy over the guest book, an e-mail came to me in the office: “Dear pastor, today my mother and I (a <> pastor’s wife and daughter) visited Central <> during our brief stay in <> . With us were another <> pastor (retired) and his wife. Your church building is beautiful and the organ everything a <> would require—and more—for hymn singing

and making music to God's glory. But, my word, we have never been to a more unwelcoming church. Your greeters greeted friends but looked right through us. There was literally no one who said hello! Even the sharing of the peace was perfunctory. It was the oddest experience and one that has left us bemused all day. I'm telling you this because your bulletin and website claim that Central <> is a welcoming church. We were welcomed with more enthusiasm and more frequently at Macy's after the service." I got back

from vacation and read the e-mail and wondered if we should take down the welcome sign.’

<https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/mark-938-50-the-welcoming-church-kegel/>

Description:

Judgment is only God's prerogative, but we humans often puff up and challenge the Holy One.

Tags:

Christians, catholic, protestant, Jesus, Christ, God, disciples, Peter, cancer, surgery, eye, Theresa, professor, Cox, conspire, majority, Roman, coliseum, jury, Gumbel, premise, church, welcoming, visitors

St. John's Episcopal Church

61 Broad Street

Elizabeth, New Jersey 07201

The Seventeenth Sunday after

Pentecost: Proper 21B

DRAFT

September 27, 2009

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 9:38-50

Lord, make us instruments of your
peace.

Amen.

I think of those persons who have been particularly kind to me over the years. There was an elderly lady in a parish I served in Connecticut who gave us a free apartment for us to use on the weekends when we came up from New York, and she would often cook us Sunday dinner to share with her and her

daughters. She was like an adopted grandmother to us.

At my first full time job I worked in Pennsylvania, a bit outside of Philadelphia, and an elderly Italian lady gave me a furnished room when I had little income to begin with, and she also would cook me some delicious Italian dishes from time to time. My father thanked her profusely when he came up for a visit. She was another wonderful adopted grandmother.

Then I remember a nice lady who ran a boarding house I lived in for my first

year of college. She took in a lot of other students who had very little to live on, and recently I learned many of my close friends lived there in her rooming house after I left. We all were so impressed by her care for our rooms and for our comfort.

I would say I have been particularly blessed at many times in my life by people who went out of their way to be kind and considerate.

I can only explain this special blessedness I experienced through my life as being someone whom God

seemed always to look after. I was never really lost, never really alone, never desperately poor, never hungry, never lacking necessities. I would have to conclude that God loved me and that the Holy Spirit was looking out for me.

How about you? Have you felt the blessedness of God in your life? Have you been able to escape terrible diseases, war, abject poverty? Then give God the glory!

Not all of us have had such gifted lives, I suppose, but we are guaranteed that God will continue to look out for his

own, thanks be to God! And I do believe God does hear our cries of distress, our prayers of desperate need, and gives us the blessed answers that we need at the time we need them.

Can you tell the times you received some special kindness when there was nothing in particular that you did to deserve it? I would say those were times of grace, God's grace for us. It seems to me that God does choose us, we don't choose God. There is nothing we can do to earn God's kindnesses or God's love. God just loves us.

Now in today's gospel, it sounds at first that we are under the punishing thumb of God, don't you think? We are told to cut off various appendages if they are a cause of our stumbling, indicating some sort of behavior that is leading us away from God. We are to cut off that behavior, and return to the God who loves us even more than our biological parents could ever love us. So why would we leave God or run from God? But in fact, we seem to do that regularly. It is as if we can't really stand being loved unconditionally. We don't think

we deserve love, and as a result we may even ‘act up’ just to prove we don’t deserve all that love that God gives us.

I wonder if various addictions are a way we ‘act out’ our frustrations about being loved so thoroughly by God. We would rather see our sins than to be forgiven our sins. And we balk at the thought that God loves us through thick and thin, through the good times and through our bad acting times. We can’t really turn off God’s love for us, or for anyone as far as that is concerned. Now, I don’t think we live ‘charmed lives’ by

any stretch of the imagination; we are simply the recipients of a huge amount of God's freely given grace. Whenever we are down, God helps us to get up again. Whenever we are rejected by the world, God still assures us we are the apple of God's eye, and more important than the most beautiful flower in his field or bird in the sky. All we humans are a specially privileged part of creation; we are indeed created in God's image, and since God sees God's self when God looks on us, God will always give us another chance when we fall, and

another opportunity to show others how much God loves us.

Now, we do have certain responsibilities to show God's love to others. We are to be facilitators of God's love and care. We are not to block any of God's kindnesses to others, but to let God's love flow freely to all.

As I was walking down the street last week a thought occurred to me that I could probably do something to help anyone and everyone I encountered on my journey, but if I stopped to help everybody in their need, I would never

be able to reach my own destination. So, I realized later that God was saying that that was God's job, God took the responsibility for all those along my journey; and that I, Joe, didn't have to worry about any of them unless God particularly put someone God wanted to be helped directly in my pathway, which of course does happen from time to time. Don't you ever get the sense that someone has been placed in your pathway for you to be specially concerned for? That is what I think happened to those who were so kind to

me in my earlier life. They saw in me someone who needed a bit of special care, and they reached out to me to give me that care. Of course, now that I look back on those serendipitous blessed events, I thank God that God was indeed keeping me under God's wings and in God's kind hand. God worked through others to make my life full and whole. I hope you feel that way about your life when you think about all the turning points you have passed and took what finally turned out to be the best way for you to go. I do think that about my life,

that God interceded at just the right time every time I needed a special kindness. Don't you think that way about your own life? I suspect you do, especially when you think about the miracles you have experienced in your life.

In response to all that love that has been showered upon each of us, I think we are seriously beholden to reflect that love on to others. Love shouldn't stay bottled up inside ourselves; love needs to be given away, acted upon, and never closed up.

I think St. John's Church has been particularly blessed as well. When we were recently so near closing our doors due to our poor finances, God came through for us at the eleventh hour. Why the eleventh hour? I think it was a bit of test for us to see if we indeed were putting all our faith on Jesus Christ our Lord to intercede for us on behalf of his heavenly Father. We could have thrown up our hands and called it quits, but we didn't. We kept serving others, kept helping them in their concerns, and God has particularly blessed us for that, I do

firmly believe. There are probably very few other institutions our size that would take on the care of probably three to four people for every one of us. When I think of the 64 people who came to our Karaoke Vespers last Sunday and all of who got a delicious meal served to them, I marvel at that miracle. And even though we didn't collect enough in all our services to feed all those people, a miraculous help showed up at our doorstep—Trinity Episcopal Church in Cranford, who brought fourteen dozen hard boiled eggs, innumerable numbers

of sandwiches and fruit, and an entire team of young and old to serve that food to probably over eighty people by the end of the afternoon. And I know that today St. Paul's Episcopal Church is planning to do the very same thing for us. We provide the place and the people, and they provide the volunteers and the food. It is a true miracle is all I can say for it.

Maybe you are a bit of a skeptic about God's gracious provisions for each of us. I can assure you I have been in your shoes many a time. I could not see the

road directly ahead, but always God had worked out a plan for my life. And I do believe God has worked out a wonderful plan for your life also. As we sing in the Venite in Morning Prayer: We are the people of God's pasture and the sheep of God's hand; Oh, that today we will hear and hearken to God's loving voice to us! And in the Jubilate we sing: For the Lord is good, his mercy is everlasting, and his faithfulness endures from generation to generation.

So, if you are ever feeling down and out, just remember those beautiful lines

which originate in Psalm 95 for the Venite and Psalm 100 for the Jubilate. Perhaps you will bookmark your Bibles at home so you can refer to those two uplifting Psalms from time to time.

We miraculously found a generous buyer a couple of weeks ago for three of our old stained glass windows that we could not afford to insure or repair, and now we have a bit of a reprieve to consider other avenues for our church finances for the more distant future. We were down to our last partial tanks of heating oil, so the deliverance came just

in time. I think of that poster with a kitten desperately hanging from a ball of string with the caption: Just keep hanging on! Well, we did, we did hang on, and we received an amazing miracle of deliverance.

I hope that today you get into the habit of reciting to yourself the many miracles God has done for you. The children of Israel in Moses time recited over and over again how God delivered them from the clutches of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. I suspect everyone in here today has had such a 'Red Sea'

deliverance if you think about it enough. When we keep in mind how God has always come through for us, we can gain new strength for the future challenges we will face.

God guarantees through God's loving covenant with us that God not only has looked after us in the past, especially through the loving sacrifice God's Son made for all of us, but God will continue to look after us today and on into the future. We are not God's pets, we are God's children. And with Such A Father, can we not then move ahead with

confidence in our lives, spreading the Good News of the Resurrection of Christ to others, helping them to see they are supposed to be a part of God's fold, God's land, God's church, and partake of God's grace along side of us.

Then will begin to experience the growth God has planned for our Church.

Amen.