

Sermon - October 21st
Saint Ann's Old Lyme, CT

Itching ears. Our Epistle today, Paul warns Timothy that believers are being led astray by their "itching ears." They don't like what they are hearing, and so they go elsewhere. They accumulate teachers to suit their own desires.

Contemporary Christian leaders often reach for this passage to offer some explanation for the moral deterioration of our church. "Revisionists" they claim, rather than calling the sinful world about them to repent, have allowed their God and gospel to be shaped by this corrosive culture, looking for a preacher who will "scratch" their itch, and relieve the discomfort of conviction. If only these Christians had listened to the Word of God and had not distorted the Gospel to make themselves feel better about their sins, perhaps then we, the church, would be in much better shape...but alas.

The 20th Century French playwright, novelist, and poet Jean Genet was notorious for his provocative portrayals of criminality and all manner of worldly wiles. He celebrated a beauty in evil and raised up violent criminals as icons. His work was *banned* in the United States. In 1952 Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a long analysis of Genet which he entitled *Saint Genet*. According to Sartre, by using every fiber of his creative being to depict evil, Genet had at the same time made a compelling case for the existence and presence of light. By being *oh so bad*, he ratified the distinct possibility of *oh so good*. Even the most focused subversives among us often fail in their efforts to rewrite the rules...to redraw the lines.

In the Stephen Sondheim song *Putting it Together* the hero-artist laments the futility of invention and the small-mindedness of his critics-- "all they really like is what they know." As consumers of culture we tend embrace, not novelty and innovation, but rather, familiarity and constancy. The hero gets the girl. The criminal goes to jail. These recognized moral categories ground us. Ahh. Yes. Good, evil. Friends and foes of freedom. The stunning beauty and the horrific beast, the brilliant Jekyll and the diabolical Hyde, the virginal and enchanting Snow White, and her evil temptress the wicked queen. Mirror, mirror on the wall...

We treasure these stories because they call to us in the familiar cadences of our own moral training grounds at home, in society and, yes in church. It may be why we were brought to church in the first place. To learn right from

wrong. It may be why we come still, or why we bring our children, our grandchildren. We want them to learn what is right and what is wrong. We want them to know what we know, and to hold on for dear life.

Back to Paul, and the ears. In this letter, Paul tells Timothy that the danger of pursuing comfortable and convenient teaching, rather than the Gospel, is not that such believers would become bigger sinners. According to Paul, the danger to these itchers, is that in their discomfort with the Gospel, the good news in Christ, they would be tempted to abandon the truth about God, and go instead after myths.

My grandmother was what some in her generation would call a hot ticket. She smoked three packs of Kool filter Kings a day and cursed like a sailor. I remember as a kid sitting across from her at the breakfast table, in awe. She had one of those double sided magnifying mirrors that flipped back and forth with bright lights on the sides like in a movie star dressing room. Every morning she would sit at the kitchen table, drink her coffee, smoke her cigarettes and put her face on. Once coifed she would turn to the newspaper. "I start with the obituaries" she told me, "if I'm not in there, I start my crossword puzzle."

Last year I was blessed to be with Gram in one of her final hours. "Gram, its OK." I told her, "God is ready for ya. Your room is all made up. You got your movie star mirror, a cup of coffee. There are at least four ashtrays, And the paper is there, turned to the obituaries...you are in them... Gram, its OK. God is ready for you." She couldn't talk any more, but I know she heard me because she started shaking her head back and forth... and her lips struggled to form the word... "no...no." At the end of her story, she was convinced that she had not done enough, that she was "not quite good enough" for God.

What is it that we see when we gaze at our own mirrors on the wall? Do we espouse faith and hope, but secretly fear that we may have just one too many vices, that the sheer weight of those things done and left undone, injuries we have cause, known and unknown, that the *weight* of all our imperfections, just might be heavy enough to disqualify us from divine welcome.

Over the past couple of months we have heard several parables from the Gospel of Luke, stories many call the "How much more's." If your child asks for a fish, would you give a scorpion? If you human parents can give

good gifts to your children...how much more..God” A shepherd leaves 99 sheep to seek and rescue the poor wandering one. If this simple shepherd displays such care...How much more, God. A father heralds the return of his prodigal son. If this human father...How much more...God.”

And today we have yet another from the same mold. A judge...a jerk really. He has no use for God, he doesn't like people and would prefer you would all just go away. A widow begs him for justice. He ignores her. She persists. Finally, because she is such a pain...he grants her justice ..just so she'll GO AWAY. And if this jerky judge...how much more God.

My brother went to West Point. A man of great courage and integrity, he was a model recruit. He respectfully obeyed his officers and endured humiliating discipline and rituals. In his third year, they assigned him his own company of cadets. And then the trouble began. Bill refused to humiliate his charges. He treated them with respect and kindness. He admitted weakness. He called them by their names.

Needless to say, he got in big trouble for this outrageous behavior. Meanwhile, between disciplinary sessions with his superiors, Bill's company began to perform. In fact, they outperformed every other company. Eventually, the higher ups left him to his own peculiar devices, and walked away, scratching their heads.

The senior officers were not the only ones perplexed. There were also baffled recruits. They arrived at basic training, poised for sustained abuse and got..Bill?? One wonders how many transfer requests were submitted that day.

Yet, many stayed. They pushed through the weirdness of their unmet expectations of abuse, and dared to believe that his kindness and respect was genuine. It was not easy. Many of their previously held beliefs about the world, and certainly the world of the military, had to be dismantled. This extraordinary treatment, they came to understand, had absolutely nothing to do with them or their behavior; it flowed from Bill's character and integrity. Each recruit stood at a crossroads, tempted to wander away from this curious kindness, drawn instead by itching ears to the harsh known. But many stayed, and found themselves excelling under the “weight” of this peculiar, unearned... love. And how much more..God.

About a month after a wedding, having not heard from the bride and groom, some of you, from my mother's generation, might be inclined to give a call. "Hello dear. I just wanted to make sure you got my gift. I didn't hear from you and I just wanted to make sure it didn't get lost in transit." (Death by thank-you note.)

Last week Peter pointed to our culture's lack of a vocabulary of thankfulness, compared with our extensive repertoire for complaint. Perhaps our anemic gratitude thesaurus points not to our displeasure with the gifts of God, but with the fact that many of us never received the gift in the first place. God's love, "lost in transit." Have we really tasted God's outrageous abundance? Have we fallen to our knees, blown away by God's commitment to and delight in ...us? Or at the end of our days, will we still be fearfully scanning our internal moral balance sheets? Did I go to church enough, serve enough soup, sew enough blankets?

See, this is the problem with the myths. When we draw our world in bright lines of right and wrong, good and evil...then where do we place ourselves on this map? If we fancy ourselves good, we spend our days ducking the magnifying mirror, struggling fiercely to keep up appearances. If we consider ourselves "bad" we wonder what it will take to get us over the line. Either way we live in desperate insecurity. A state, most of us would not wish on even our enemies. And how much more...God.

Jacob lived with such insecurity. He had cheated, stolen, and walked on people to get ahead. In today's passage Jacob is struggling to reconcile his present life of faith and the fruit and consequences of his prior indiscretions. He wants God blessing but is desperately afraid that he will be killed by his brother Esau for his prior bad acts.

This struggle goes well into the night, as he wrestles with a man/angel until daybreak. The creature attempts to let go, but Jacob clings to the angel and says I will not let go until you bless me. He continues to fight. In the process he breaks a hip. But he does not let go and in the end he limps away at peace and blessed.

This, I contend, is the struggle of the Christian faith. To resist and dismantle the myths for which our itchy ears long. To tell ourselves the truth about the character of God, the truth about the fact that nothing we do will cause God to lose integrity-- that our actions do not determine God's character. ... to be

so aware of God's tenderness and adoring gaze towards us, that our lives become an outpouring of joy, faithfulness, patience, kindness, peace and all such good works as thou has't prepared for us to walk in.

Wrestle on, dear friends. Grab hold of God's ankle and don't let go until you know that love in your core. Struggle to resist the easy answers and to rest in the bosom of the spirit. Though you grow weary and become faint, do not let go, and remember that as badly as you want to win this battle ...how much more does divine love long for you to prevail.