



## Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Very Rev. Holladay Sanderson

Proverbs 1:20-33

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

Psalm 19

Today's gospel about the disciples' boundary worries and Jesus' concern about stumbling blocks raises for us questions about the nature of the community of God and about how WE can access that community. More particularly, who can access the realm of God to which we claim to belong?

I recall from my first years as a priest that a local congregation had a listing of what they believed on their website. It did not have to do with the Holy Trinity or Jesus as both God and human. The listing began with prohibitions...about dancing and drinking, about watching various media and many other matters of forbidden behavior and actions. There wasn't a lot about faith or prayer or God's love.

This was early in the decade of the Ought's, immediately post-9/11. The *Left Behind* series about the coming rapture, tribulation and end of the world was just beginning to take hold. Some folks were wondering if the new Harry Potter was satanic. Because I had parishioners asking questions, I sought out two books by the same author: one on the Occult in Harry Potter and the other on the Spirituality of Harry Potter. Both/and.

To further confuse matters, by the end of the decade, the Twilight Saga about love amid humans, vampires and werewolves would begin its own claim to fame. And smack dab in the midst of all this came Mel Gibson's bloody and often anti-semitic *Passion of the Christ*. To say that our popular culture was being stirred up would be an understatement.

I spent a lot of time exploring with our Youth Group how to find God in the varied popular images bombarding them. We watched *Chicken Run* and *Finding Nemo* over pizza, hoping to find the Jesus figure or the theological message.

This was a very Sewanee Seminary kind of thing to do then. Mentors for the Education for Ministry program - EFM - in the late 90's were guided through

exploration of the popular culture in their training. Our trainer stunned us all when she handed out a Beetle Bailey cartoon to us and welcomed us into theological reflection about the relationship between Beetle, Sarge, and, of course, God. And then we attended a viewing of *Chicken Run* and the same with God's presence with *Ginger Chicken*, *Rocky Rooster* and the *Exodus*.

Pixar became a great resource for our youth and intergenerational gatherings. We would search together on Lenten Wednesdays for the resurrection message in *Wall-E* or the source of hope in *Up*.

In this way, a way could be made to reconnect the zaniness, fright and craziness of the popular culture back to God. In his books *Everything Belongs* and *The Divine Dance*, Richard Rohr reminds us of how everything is and can be connected to the God to whom we all have access. In short, using the message of this morning: no stumbling blocks. The way for us to access God and begin to become one community is an open and welcoming path.

The disciples this morning are trying to build walls so that only **THEY**, the special followers of Jesus, can act on his behalf. They are horrified that others have somehow heard his message and actually went off on their own to preach about Jesus to others and...“gasp”... to cast out demons in his name. Who did those people think they were to hijack Jesus's ministry from his special followers?

The disciples were calling for a wall to be built around their supposed “specialness.” We know from our own experiences that walls can keep people out as in the proposed total wall against immigrants at the Mexican border or as protection in ancient China. Walls can also trap people inside as the Berlin Wall did until 1989. Jesus makes clear that walls are not what he is about at all. He said to them: “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.” And then Jesus launches into his call that we not build even more walls or stumbling blocks to hinder access to the goodness and love of the reign of God.

To NOT be a stumbling block to access is not an easy task. Esther's story is a great example of this. She is a Jewish woman, hiding her identity even while she is the wife of the Persian King Ahasuerus. (*Just a note. In '77, my NC*

organist friend, Charlsie, wrote a musical for children called Esther. One tune taught us all how to say that name!! A - has - u - ER - us!! A-has-u-ER-us! And I have never forgotten!!) Haman, a servant of the king, decided since Esther's uncle Mordecai would not bow to the king, then all the Jews should be exterminated. Esther risks using her access to the King to save the lives of the Jews. She takes this personal risk to make the point that walls are so wrong. She basically affirms that as a people all CAN be one community. And Ahasuerus agrees.

James writes about the very fount of our access to God: our ability to pray directly to God. We have the ability to petition, to offer thanks, to lament and to speak directly to God. No walls.

In Mark's story of the Gospel, the whole story is in a bit of a bracket. At Jesus' baptism, the heavens are torn apart so God can acknowledge his sonship. Then at the crucifixion, the temple curtain itself is torn open from top to bottom, demonstrating God ending the division of the Holy of Holies, the access to God's very self, from the people. Because of Jesus and all he is to us, we have been reconciled to God. Through Jesus's gift of communion and community God has been made very real to us.

Throughout our scriptures, we hear Jesus speaking as he did this morning. Do not stop him. No stumbling blocks. No walls. Jesus welcomes all into the reign of God. Jesus welcomes all into the reign of God's love.

Challenging though it may be in our distracting, divisive and confusing world, we do have a command to follow. Yes, we can find it challenging but also simple. All we have to do is live out the basic commandments of the one whom we worship. Jesus said that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul and mind and the second is like it. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. On those two commandments, EVERYTHING depends. Love welcomes. Love gives access. Love opens. Love invites. Love is alive in a community with no divisions, no walls. To live in God's love is our challenge. To live in God's love is our call.

AMEN