

**18 Pentecost  
September 30, 2012**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

Well, Pope Francis is in town. Well, not really in town ... here in St. Augustine ... but today in Philadelphia. And before that in Washington, DC, and New York City. Let's see, Washington ... the seat of government of the most powerful nation on earth. New York City ... the financial capital of the world. And Philadelphia ... the City of Brotherly Love and the place where these United States came into being. You don't think Pope Francis has an agenda, do you?

He landed in Washington and rode to the White House in his little Fiat with the windows rolled down, while the Secret service accompanied him in their SUV retrofitted to be as secure as a military tank. Pope Francis has eaten with the homeless, visited prisoners, and blessed the disabled. Obviously he takes seriously what Jesus took seriously. And it is as if he is turning the world upside down.

Several weeks ago our reading of the Hebrew Scriptures was from the Song of Solomon. I mentioned then that it was one of the only books of the Bible that did not mention God. The Book of Esther is another book of the Bible that does not contain any reference to the Holy.

This lesson from the Book of Esther is relatively new to the Episcopal Church's lists of Sunday morning readings, and it appears only once every three years. Interestingly, those who chose this reading placed it near the Jewish high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but in fact it describes the story that is told at the Jewish festival of Purim which happens in February or March of every year. Whereas we in the Episcopal Church hear the story once every three years those in the Jewish community hear it each late winter or early spring.

Anyhow, the Book of Esther is set in Persia and the tale includes a drunken party, insecure husbands, a beauty pageant, exotic etiquette, court intrigue, the plot for an anti-Semitic annihilation of all of the Jews, a public hanging, and vindictive retribution ... it, indeed, is quite a story. And, as I mentioned, not once is God spoken about in the entire book.

The story opens with the King of Persia giving an elaborate party for the heads of state of all the surrounding countries. At the end of the party he sent for his Queen to join him, but she refused her husband's order to make an appearance at a state dinner, and thus she raised the specter throughout the empire of the King allowing wifely insubordination. For her actions the Queen was banned from the court. Furthermore, in retribution, the King sought out virgins from far and near to increase the size of his harem, and then he held a beauty contest to find the fairest one of them all and crown her the new queen. This honor fell to Esther. However,

unknown to the King, Esther was Jewish, and she kept the fact that she was Jewish a secret on orders from her cousin Mordecai, who also a Jew.

Now the King of Persia promoted a member of his court named Haman to be his Chief of Staff, and everyone was required to bow down to Haman when he passed. And so they did. That is, everyone except Mordecai. This insubordination incensed Haman who plotted to kill Mordecai and annihilate all the Jews living in Persia. But Esther stepped in and pleaded with the King. In a cruel irony, as we heard in the reading this morning, it was Haman who was hanged from the very gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai, and the Jewish people were saved.

This is a story about the world being turned upside down. For the Jews it is a legend of being delivered from sure extermination. Nowadays, at the late-winter festival of Purim, Jewish children dress in costume, adults give away food, and in the synagogues, when Haman's name occurs in the reading, everyone drowns out the sound of his name with noisemakers. So Jews have united this ancient story of a thwarted annihilation of their people with a day of merrymaking: "They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat!"

What makes the Book of Esther such a story of intrigue is the reversal of the expected. The status quo has been upset. In God's realm the ways of the world are turned upside down.

Some five hundred years after the Book of Esther was written an itinerant preacher from Galilee turned the world upside down. And two thousand years after Jesus walked among the people of Palestine his words still have the power to turn our world upside down ... just look at Pope Francis. Jesus challenged every worldly understanding of power and prestige. "The first will be last and the last will be first." Jesus was counter-cultural ... and he still is. However, there are those who use his words to justify their positions of power and privilege ... they obviously miss the point. There are those who twist his words to validate the ways of the world and defend the status quo ... they know not what they do. Jesus defied the purity maps that excluded the expendables, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised. He embraced outcasts and sinners ... and he taught those who follow in his name ... those who are committed to taking seriously what Jesus took seriously ... to embrace the outcasts in their lives ... and even themselves when they feel outcast. Pope Francis is making it clear that we can do the same ... we must do the same.

In this morning's reading from Mark's gospel we hear the words, "Whoever is not against us is for us." "Whoever is **not against us** is **for us**." Yet the way the world has twisted this is to say, "Whoever is **not for us** is **against us**." These are remarkably different statements. The words from Jesus' mouth are inclusive and inviting. The words, as they are twisted, are exclusive and divisive.

Those who are **not against us** include people of all colors, and languages, and faiths, and nationality. They include people who look like us, dress like us, and eat the same foods as we do. But those who are **not against us** also includes people who look very different from us,

who have another cultural orientation, and who worship in ways that we may not understand. But just because they are different doesn't mean that they are **against us**.

On the other hand, those who are **not for us** can include people who look just like us, but have a different opinion, or a different faith, or a different nationality. When the words of Jesus are twisted in this way it allows us to label others as demonic, unpatriotic, disloyal, even faithless. It means that if someone is to fit into a new community they have to become like those already there. It means that they have to adopt our culture, our language, our values, our beliefs, and our opinions.

These words of Jesus, when they are twisted and misconstrued, are used at times to divide people rather than unite. Whether it is the issue climate change, or immigration, or threat of terrorism, or the presidential election the twisted words imply that if one does not support a particular position then one is traitorous. Even in the Church these twisted words are used at times to designate those who do not follow a particular theological orthodoxy and are therefore heretical, unfaithful, and even a sinner.

But the words Jesus spoke were, "Whoever is **not against us** is for us." And let's put this into context.

These verses we hear this morning come from the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark's gospel. At the beginning of the chapter Jesus is on top of the mountain with Peter and James and John and is transfigured. The three disciples see Jesus in a cloud speaking with Moses and Elijah, and they hear the voice of God saying, "This is my son, the beloved; listen to him." When Jesus comes down from the mountain he encounters a crowd with his whole band of disciples. There is a boy who suffers from epileptic seizures who the disciples have been unable to heal, but who is healed by Jesus.

From there Jesus and the disciples headed to Capernaum. For the second time in Mark's gospel Jesus tells his disciples that "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

As we heard last week the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying and were afraid to ask him. Instead, they begin arguing about who amongst them is the greatest. And Jesus' words turned their world upside down: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

But these disciples, like you and me, were often dense and needed an object lesson, so "Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Imagine, if you can, the state of mind ... and the state of soul ... of these disciples. Peter, James, and John had just seen Jesus elevated to the status of Moses, the Law Giver; and Elijah, the

embodiment of what it meant to be a prophet. They then heard God's voice telling them to listen to Jesus. Then Jesus turns their world upside down. It is not the greatest by worldly standards who will be the first, rather it is the one who is the servant ... the lowest ... the one who is willing to give of themselves the most.

Into this comes one from outside the disciples who is exorcizing demons ... and doing it in the name of Jesus. Right in the face of the disciples, who had just been unable to exorcize the demon from the boy with epileptic seizures. John was indignant. John is thinking, "This man is not one of our followers. He is not like us. He is **not for us**, so he must be **against us**. Shouldn't we stop him?" 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."

The world would have us believe that those who are **not for us**, or who are not like us, who look different, or hold different opinions, or speak a different language, or worship a God by another name ... that they must be against us. I mean, if I'm right ... how can they be right also? They must be wrong. But Jesus isn't saying that. He turned the world upside down for his disciples, and he turns the world upside down for us also. Jesus said, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

What makes the Book of Esther such a story of intrigue is the reversal of the expected. The status quo has been upset. In God's realm the ways of the world are turned upside down.

Jesus came into this world and turned it upside down. He challenged every worldly understanding of power and prestige. "The first will be last and the last will be first." He was counter-cultural. And he still is. Just look at Pope Francis.

There are those who use his words to justify their positions of power and privilege, but they miss the point. There are those who twist his words to validate the ways of the world and defend the status quo ... they know not what they do. Jesus defied those who excluded the expendables, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised. He embraced outcasts and sinners ... and he taught those who follow in his name ... those who take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... to embrace the outcasts in their lives ... and even themselves when they feel outcast.

Whoever is not against us is for us. Look at others the way that Jesus looked at those around him. See each and every person on this planet as a child of God. Be committed to taking seriously what Jesus took seriously. Then, in the name of Jesus turn the world upside down. If the leader of the largest institution in the world, Pope Francis, can lower himself to be "servant of all," then so can we.

Amen.