

God's Holy Mountain

(Exodus 19:1-13; Mk 9:35-37,42-43,50)

9/29/24

Rev. J. Koyama

Last Sunday, during the children's message, I noticed that the kid's minds were wandering. It was hard to get them to focus as they were in a playful mood. I'm a pretty soft-hearted guy and I believe that playfulness in a child is not something to be crushed.

So, when I hear Jesus's warning, that "whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble would be better off, with a millstone around his neck and thrown in the sea", I take them as words that apply to this situation. I think that Jesus is saying to us that robbing a child of the ability to be a joyful, even playful servant of God's love, is a sin of the highest order.

I am told that Jesus himself had a playful sense of humor, like the one about the camel going through the eye of a needle. Have you ever seen that one draw a smile? His humor is completely lost in translation. You probably remember that during the 60's and 70's pictures of the "laughing Jesus" came out as a correction to the overly solemn portrait of him that we all grew up with.

As I sat there doing the children's message, hoping to get them to focus, I was of two minds, both of which are rooted in scripture, neither one entirely satisfying. The first seems too accommodating. It involves not doing anything that will separate a child from his or her comfortable seat on Jesus's lap. Let them get comfortable and enjoy being in our midst, where they can be playful and experience unconditional love and acceptance without fear that someone's foot is going to come down on them and quash their good feelings.

The other option was to put my foot down; to go ahead and interrupt them and draw a line that would help instill in them the importance of being aware of their surroundings; of the need to be respectful of God and of the congregation. But it didn't seem that we were quite there.

You may notice that in the Gospel reading, while Jesus is indulging the child by letting that child sit on his lap, he is at the same time being quite severe with his adult disciples. And he doesn't mince words. They need to be attentive to the needs of this child, whom they would almost certainly otherwise ignore, because if they do anything to make a child stumble, hell itself will be waiting for them.

What this tells us is that somewhere between childhood and adulthood, learning how to be attentive and respectful toward everyone, especially

toward the needs of children, is a requirement for his followers and not an option.

The Gospel reading reveals a kind of back and forth between these two minds, both of which are essential for the life we share. One is the loving embrace and acceptance of even the least among us: “No matter who you are or where you’ve been, you are welcome here!” is the motto. And it reflects our commitment to welcome all with open arms and a show of generous hospitality.

At the same time, Christian community is far from being a place where anything goes. It is a place where self-discipline out of respect for others and for the sake of their well-being is expected.

God’s Holy Mountain

The first reading today from Exodus, highlights how this concern for drawing appropriate lines and respecting boundaries is deeply rooted in the Bible. It describes the moments leading up to Moses’s journey to the top of God’s Holy Mountain, to receive the 10 Commandments.

It is clear that many of the people are also eager to go up the mountain. And it may seem surprising to us, even barbaric, that God basically

draws a line around the mountain and tells them that anyone who so much as touches that line is to be put to death. And this is not a polite request. This is like Mom telling the kids not to touch the cookie jar times 100.

And when God speaks, we can assume that it sounds like the thunder and lightning from the storm clouds that cover the mountain when God is present there. The story seeks to instill in God's people a fear of the Lord; a respect borne of the understanding that they are no match for a God whose power is even greater than nature unleashed in all its fury. This is a God who is not to be crossed, and the consequences of crossing him are dire.

I have mixed feelings about the impact of stories like this, where God appears to be using threats and creating fear to establish order. People who seek control over others, can point to them as a way to justify their own use of threats and intimidation to control others, especially to control children. It's too easy for people to act as though they using the threat of punishment in service of a greater good, when in fact they are using it as a way to relieve their own feelings of frustration or anger or their need for control.

And beyond this, a faith that is driven by fear is not what faith in Jesus Christ is supposed to be. The Good news of Jesus Christ is something that we choose to give ourselves to freely, because it is good and because it is life giving.

On the other hand, I wonder to myself whether, we shouldn't take the tradition of fearing God more seriously today. I say this because, looking back, one of the most important facts about my own childhood was my fear of my father. When he raised his voice at me, it was like thunder, the threat of a spanking was like a thunderclap. Both rarely occurred. But when he drew a line around something and said don't do it, I was afraid to cross him, because I feared the consequences.

And over time, my fear turned into respect, especially as I began to realize that when my father expressed anger or shouted out some command, for the most part, he did it because he cared and wanted the best for me.

I guess my question is, "Where does respect come from? Can respect be something that does not somehow start with fear? Is respect something that can be learned as a result of gently and patiently explaining things over and over again without penalty?"

My guess is that each one of us might answer these questions a little differently. I come from a generation that moved from “spank when necessary” and “when you speak to an adult you say “Yes ma’am or No ma’am.” to a “never spank” society where some parents allow children to call speak to them on a first name basis and where children learn by being reasoned with. I have always lived in basic agreement with that trend.

But during that time, I have also experienced a general increase in disrespectful behavior. We live in a society today in which, arguably, rudeness and disrespect are not seen as having consequences. Often it seems that people are not even aware that they are being disrespectful. And I think it has to do with our lack of clarity about how we should draw lines around what is ok and what is out of bounds.

This seems to me a very serious matter. It effects the quality of our freedom as a people. Because “Freedom” is not a free for all. It actually depends on mutual respect; where we are aware of lines that should not be crossed and we are willing to adhere to them out of a respect for others **or** in church you might say that our respect is for the presence and will of God who is with us and within each one of us.

We have our own holy mountain right here in the sanctuary. You can see the step leading up to the altar and then a few more steps leading to the pulpit. And we have a line drawn around it in our hearts, that tells us it is a sacred meeting place and that we regard it with a certain respect.

When I walk up to this pulpit, I better be on good behavior, because if I play loopy with God's word or behave dismissively, there will be serious consequences. See how the carpet in this area is vacuumed regularly. See how the paraments are carefully ordered. These things tell us that we are in a house that takes respectfulness seriously.

I guess that is why I wear a tie and no-one comes to worship in bedroom slippers. And when I sit with the kids on the steps, I need to be aware that we dare to sit on the side of God's Holy Mountain (as Jesus did also in his Sermon on the Mount) and that we must strive for a children's time that both invites the children to feel at home in our midst, and also moves them toward a greater respect for where they are and who they are in the presence of.

And that awareness and respect that is expected when we gather on the side of this Holy Mountain also applies elsewhere, including

downstairs at coffee hour. When a line is drawn around a space which says don't run here or please don't shout; it should not be to squash youthful enthusiasm. It should be seen as a way in which all of us can show respect for our surroundings and for each other; and as a way in which our children can learn respect also.

Out of respect for their surroundings, the children will be able to avoid the terrible consequence that an elder may get knocked over and seriously hurt. At the same time, out of respect for the children, we can include them in our grown up world in a way that makes them feel welcome and draws them closer to God's love, because this house belongs to each child every bit as much as it belongs to grown ups. And Jesus makes this point abundantly clear when he sets the child on his lap in the midst of his disciples, where it probably made faces and occasionally distracted them from the "supposedly" more consequential adult business they were trying to conduct.

Some of you may wonder whether this sermon is in response to a concern I have heard about children in worship. No-one has spoken to me recently about it. I am only speaking from my own observations and concern over the lack of respectfulness in our society as a whole.

Scripture helps us to begin to understand it. And perhaps gives us ways to think about how we can carry and pass on the torch of being a community that is properly respectful, in terms of drawing lines and setting boundaries. I think it is a conversation we should have that is both practical and essential to our salvation.