

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
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My Scandinavian forebears could be blunt. If someone they knew was perceived to be putting on airs, they would have said, "I knew your father." In other words: "You don't impress me. I know where you come from." Australians have a term for such an attitude: tall poppy syndrome. This refers to the cultural phenomenon of how people try to hold back—and even directly attack—those who are perceived to be better than the norm, especially those who have come from humble and ordinary backgrounds.

It happens all the time. The opprobrium directed at the Duchess of Sussex is a case in point. Whatever one may make of that particular three-ring circus, there's an undeniable undercurrent that this woman is a climber who gets what she deserves. As always, these "tall poppies" are like lightning rods, and the reason people direct such anger—and even viciousness—at them is because for whatever reason, they shed an uncomfortable and unwelcome light on things we would rather not examine too closely, be it our institutions, our cherished beliefs, and even ourselves.

This is exactly the picture presented to us by Mark this morning: "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offence at him." But what was so offensive? Maybe it was what he was teaching in the synagogue. Maybe it was because he had become something of a celebrity in the region, what with the casting out of demons and the healing of disease. Or maybe it was because in those godly acts of mercy they saw just how ungodly and unmerciful they were.

I'm willing to bet it was that last one. Of course the convenient and conventional way of reading the Jesus story is to assume folks wanted to do away with him because he claimed to be the Son of God. But we don't generally execute people for saying such things—not even in the ancient world. Oh that might have been the lever the powers-that-be pulled to activate the Roman justice system, but it wasn't what got under their skin—not really.

No: what got under their skin was the fact that by his very life, Jesus exposed the hypocrisy and paucity of *their* spiritual lives and religious practices. He held up a mirror both to their society and to their selves and they didn't like what they saw. "I knew your father, Jesus," they defensively said. Except they didn't—not really. And that was precisely the problem. This is why we're told that Jesus could "do no deed of power there." Their intransigence, their hostility, their basic lack of openness, was a block to the power of the Spirit who worked through Jesus.

Not much has changed down through the centuries—alas. Most of us only hear what we want to hear and woe betide the person who questions—or challenges—that worldview.

And the reason is because our identity, our sense of self, is dependant on the preservation of these attitudes and habits of mind.

Back in the 1950s an English priest called Harry Williams suffered a mental breakdown after which he was able to let go of the “image” he had so carefully constructed—as much for himself as for others—and accept the truth that he was a gay man. Reflecting on the experience he said:

“...We project our own feelings of insecurity upon the Heavens. There is, shall we say, some discovery, some new form of knowledge, and it contains a threat—a threat, that is, to ourselves as committed to untenable ideas and attitudes. But we shan’t think of it like that. The threat, we shall think, is to God Himself—as indeed it is to the God of our own invention. So we shall rush to God’s defense ... that is, of ourselves.”

We’ve just celebrated Pride Month, and Canada Day. The fact that the first has become an almost mainstream affair—even a family one—is testament to how far we’ve come as a society. But we’ve only come that far because of the courageousness of people who insisted they not only be seen but heard, who challenged the myth of the perfect family as embodied by *Leave it to Beaver* and who knows what else. This year’s Canada Day celebrations have been fraught and difficult in light of the scandal and tragedy of the unmarked graves discovered in British Columbia and Saskatchewan. We don’t want to hear these stories and we may not even want to hear the voices that tell them. They make us angry and uncomfortable, and maybe even indignant. After all, you and I aren’t responsible for what happened.

And we aren’t. That’s true, at least on a personal level. But at a deeper level, a moral level, we *are* responsible, insofar as we unthinkingly participate in, and benefit from, what has latterly come to be called “white privilege.” But instead of being angry and defensively entitled about that, we can choose to be compassionate and humble.

That’s really the point of this morning’s gospel. Jesus doesn’t waste his time and energy hanging around with people who don’t—or won’t—get it. He goes back into the world and he tells his disciples “If any place will not hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So the question for you and me who strive to build the Kingdom in this community is this: Do we have the will and humility to sit and listen to those who disturb our calm and upset our various personal, social, and religious apple-carts? Shall we cut down those it’s easy to call uppity or do we find a way to let them flourish? Can we accept that there are other narratives than ours that deserve to be heard—be they religious, cultural, or political?

My friends, the great sickness of our time isn’t the coronavirus. It’s soul sickness. Yet even now, there are those who move among us and who can help us heal—if only by the witness of their courage and the example of their own self-sacrifice. Shall we ignore and defame them in defensive self-righteousness? Or shall we dare to stop, listen, be vulnerable—and even uncertain—long enough for the Spirit to rise again within and among us so that a great deed of powerful justice can be done?

So as you move through the week to come pay attention to your inner dialogue—those thoughts and feelings that arise within you. Pay attention to how your attitudes towards others may well carry assumptions that are perhaps unfair, or even unkind. And take a moment each day—maybe as you begin your day—to offer the prayer that I began with as a way of giving yourself to the one who can transform our lives by taking our minds and thinking through them, by taking our lips and speaking through them, and by taking our hearts and truly setting them on fire.