

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21. September 27, 2015. St. Augustine's Freeland
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I remember the last Summer Rachel and I were in Indiana we visited Spring Mill State Park - it's only about 35 miles south of Bloomington, but in the nearly 20 years I lived there I'd never been. It's a beautiful park - "Snuggled into a backdrop of stately oaks and rolling scenic hills," the DNR will tell you - and in middle there's one of the first industrial villages in the area - started in 1800, and build around a mill, fed by streams from two limestone caves.

It's there that I saw my first real millstone - or, actually, two millstones - because you need two stones to grind the grain for flour.

The ones at Spring Mill, are large, and very heavy - thousands of pounds.

There were two sorts of millstones used in biblical times - the women in families had two small stones they used to mill grain for their families. They'd be fairly light weight. Then there were the ones that were much bigger - ones so big, in fact, that it required a donkey or an ass to turn them.

The ones Jesus talked about in today's gospel were of the large and heavy variety - not as bit as Spring Mill's, but still many hundreds of pounds - certainly way too big for any one human to turn.

Imagine, then, tying one around a person's neck and throwing them into the sea...no one would survive that! And it's a pretty extreme response, don't you think, to what appears to be a minor issue.

So what is the issue here? It's one that was clearly central for Mark's community - the way he recounts this story makes it clear he was trying to address concerns within his own community by recounting a story about community.

At its core, the issue is a self-centered pride that says "my way or the highway." Truth is - alas - such an attitude is very common in every day and age.

Just look at Paul's letters to see that story writ large in the post-Jesus communities - and remember, Paul's letters were written before Mark's gospel. By looking at what Paul cautions against, or outright condemns, we can see for ourselves the story of his early communities, which is the story of Christianity's infant years. It's a story of disagreements and sometimes outright conflict. There are internal arguments about theology and evangelical strategy, anxiety, jealousy about roles, and elitism. Sometimes the arguments became very personal, with some in these communities outright rejecting Paul because they disagreed with him - with his own understanding of Jesus, and with the way he wished each community to be structured.

That's a pattern with Christianity that's continued to this day - leadership is dangerous, especially when the leader's vision represents a threat to the status quo, as Jesus' and Paul's vision did.

The Jesus we meet in Mark has no time for such anxiety, jealousy, or elitism. Jesus' response is expansive, universalistic, and radically inclusive. As long as something is being done in the name of Christ they will "by no means lose the reward" (Mark 9:41). Or, to put it another way, Christian community gets into a dangerous place when it believes its particular iteration of faith is better than any other iteration of faith. We cluster around a vision of Christian faith we call "Episcopal," but it is not the be-all-and-end-all of Christian identity; we are not better than other Christian communities – or, at least, it's not for us – who have logs in our eyes – to judge whether we are "better than" – that's for God.

On a mundane level, this is why last year we re-wrote our by-laws to say "you don't have to be an Episcopalian to be a member of St. Augustine's." Some of you have chosen to become Episcopalians, others not – we have, here, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Assembly of God folk...and the list goes on. We who are Episcopalians are not better than those who are not – we are all children of the same Father, we're all brothers and sisters in Christ.

Another way to put this is that we are one community, yet we are diverse within that unity. Paul – in 1 Corinthians – consistently makes that point, though he's often misunderstood, even today, when he does so. For Paul unity was not the central goal he wanted for the Corinthian community. It was, first and foremost, a recognition that such unity could only be fully realized when the community first recognized and welcomed the radical diversity of its members.

Paul's letters, remember, are not evangelical tracts designed to explain to non-members – non-participants – why Christianity was so neat, and thus why they should give it a try. Paul's letters were all about the internal workings of these communities: rules of the road, if you will; ways to live and not to live. When we read Paul's letters they are talking about us; not the people we meet in our daily lives outside of this place; not the people who might be thinking about joining us – or those who'd never darken our doors; about us.

Which brings us full circle back to the mill-stone. If we ourselves are stumbling-blocks for others in our community, Mark reports Jesus as saying that we're in deep do-do! Time to deal with the log in our own eye before we point out the splinter in our neighbor's eye.

That's the sort of thing that gets taken care of between us and God – our own spiritual relationship with God underpins our relationship with each other. To get right with each other requires we actually get right with God first.

It's so easy to cast the first stone! And it makes us feel so good! By pulling someone else down – immigrants, refugees, African Americans, Fundamentalists, Muslims, other drivers, people who have more than 10 items in the quick-checkout lane – anyone who is "not like us" – we feel better about ourselves.

Today, the gospel calls us to take a different path – and as I say that I'm reminded of Yogi Berra's great comment that "when you come to a fork in the road, take it!" We know what he meant. And in our context, it means this: when faced with a choice we need to make a choice,

and that choice should be the one that leads to the embracing of diversity, and the supporting of unity, so that we may really be the community we claim to be; one that follows Jesus.