

8.29.21 L22P14 Sin Surprised by Grace

- Most of you probably remember the children's song, "Where is Thumbkin."
 - So as a reminder it begins like this... [do just thumb and pointer fingers]
 - So this is our pointer finger, right?
- Our pointer finger is very useful
 - It can point to something absolutely amazing, like "it's a bird, it's a plane, it's Superman!" Or for younger people today maybe, "Look, it's Spiderman!"
 - A pointer figure can also point to something very beautiful. If you take a moment to watch the slideshow out in the lobby from our recent Bible School you can see Mary pointing out a rainbow in the sky to the children
 - Or a pointer finger can help give directions. For instance, to get to the rest rooms you go out that center door, make a left, turn right at the hallway, go a little ways and the restrooms will be on your right
- But our pointer finger has another use, and that is to accuse
 - [POINTING] YOU! YOU did it!
 - [WAGGING] What you did was wrong!
- In today's gospel reading there is a lot of finger pointing and accusing
 - It seems that some religious leaders who had come all the way from Jerusalem up to Galilee apparently to see and observe Jesus, noticed that Jesus's disciples ate without washing their hands
 - YOU Jesus, what kind of teacher are you?
 - Your disciples don't even wash their hands before they eat like we've all been taught
- But then Jesus turned the tables on his accusers
 - It's not the dirt and grim outside of us that makes us impure, or bad, or even sinful...
 - Rather it is the desires of the heart, the desires of the self-centered heart, the desires of the heart turned in on itself that make us unclean and even evil
 - In other words, Jesus responded to their accusation of a small transgression, by revealing the accusers' greater hypocrisy and sinfulness

- Now if we stopped here, just like this gospel reading stops here, we would be left with nothing but pointing fingers, sins both great and small, and the revelation that sin flows from the human heart... and that ultimately – ultimately no matter how hard we try, the accusing finger eventually ends up pointed back at us
- But that is only part of the story
- Thank God – and I mean that – thank God there is more to the Gospel of Mark, and more to the fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ than today’s gospel lesson!
- Now it’s time for all of us to use our fingers for another children’s rhyme
 - Many of you when were taught this little poem when you were very young – “Here is the Church and Here is the Steeple”
 - So whether you know this, or whether it’s new to you, put your hands like this [interlocking fingers], make a steeple with your pointer fingers, and indulge your inner child for a moment and repeat after me...
 - You see the deep truth is that the church, whether it is meeting in a building like those wiggling interlocked fingers, or whether it is meeting outside at some place like a church camp – the church is the place where people not only with unwashed hands, but also with ill-intentions of the heart gather
 - And in this gathering, we hear a shocking and surprising thing... that *despite* sins great or small, *despite* the desires of our hearts, and *despite* our hearts being turned inward toward ourselves rather than outward to God, through Jesus Christ God has chosen – God in Jesus Christ absolutely chosen to love and forgive us
 - In simple words – the church is NOT for good people, the church is for BAD people.
 - The church is exactly the right place for sinners, because here and only here is the gift of God’s love freely and abundantly proclaimed
 - And the shape that God’s love takes, is the shape of Jesus on the cross speaking words of forgiveness not only to one of the criminals hanging

beside him, but speaking words of forgiveness even to those who crucified him

- But here's the thing, so many people in our world don't know that this Gospel of forgiveness is the purpose of the church!
 - Survey after survey of American attitudes toward religion show that there has been a huge shift in the last 20 or 30 years or so
 - Now, the biggest group of people in polls about faith is not a large denomination like the Roman Catholic Christians or the Baptist Christians – no, now the biggest group in this country belong to no church, *and they don't even want to!*
 - We call them the NONES – not n-u-n-s, but the n-o-n-e-s, because when asked about religious affiliation, they say “none!”
 - Unfortunately, one of the biggest reasons that the Nones give for disinterest in organized religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is that what they feel, what they see, what they too often hear shouted in awful headlines, is that church-people are not making steeples with our pointer fingers, but rather church people are POINTING... ACCUSING... JUDGING!
 - And unfortunately, let's admit that with loud harsh voices that make the news, or sometimes with whispered gossip, at its worst, the church has and continues to point and accuse
- But I would like to ask you to use your hands one last time
 - This time, I want you to make the church this way – with the fingers out
 - This way, the children's rhyme just doesn't work, because the fingers are outside, and so the people are outside the building
 - But isn't that what the church is like most of the week? Don't we gather to listen to the gospel only an hour or maybe two a week? Don't we spend most of our lives not gathered together for worship, but scattered out in the world throughout the week?
 - When we are not here, when we are not inside the church, but outside the church building in daily life, *our job is TO SURPRISE PEOPLE!*

- Our job is to surprise and overwhelm whenever we can the common perception that the church is about accusation and judgment, by surprising and overwhelming that perception with words and actions of love and welcome
- Our vocation is to speak the word of God's forgiveness to people who in the past and present have been hurt and wounded by the folks who could only point out their sins
- And our call... our call as followers of Christ, is to invite people to gather with us – not for growing numbers or to become “a successful church” whatever that is – but our call is to invite people to come and be surprised by scripture and prayers, be surprised by hymns and liturgy, and be surprised by the gifts of Holy Baptism and Communion that all together, proclaim the Good News that God's forgiveness overwhelms whatever sin can be pointed out, and God loves us even with crooked and inwardly turned hearts