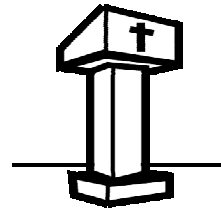


Sermon Synopsis -
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 22, 2010
by the Rev. Trish Ross



“This is one of my favorite stories. Jesus, as is his habit, set someone free. Jesus, as is his habit, was extra-ordinarily kind to someone most folks would classify as a reject. In doing this, Jesus, as is his habit, upset the status quo. And Jesus, as is his habit, shamed those who got upset with him for his kindness.

Most folks, then as now, worry about change. When things change, you might lose something in the process or as a result. A big part of my professional work was in managing change in organizations. Understanding what scares people is the most important, and most overlooked, step. We learn to deal with a situation, even if the situation is tough, and changing even a small element threatens our ability to cope. Change might push us over the edge to a place where we can't deal, where we might lose what we have gained. Scary stuff.

The leaders of the synagogue had a lot to lose. They were the local experts on how things should be done. They had power over the people. They could officially declare people unclean, and limit how individuals could interact with society. When Jesus loved that woman, he defied their ruling. If they let him get away with it, they faced a loss of face and stature in the community. And if they took his words to heart, they risked losing the self-righteousness that gave them such comfort.

So they were clearly threatened by Jesus' action, and they had reason to worry. He didn't accept their definitions of what life should be. He rejected the definition of clean and unclean, and he redefined the Sabbath, one of the central principles of their faith and life. These were definitions they'd used for hundreds of years.

When they presented their arguments, Jesus made them look stupid. He asked them a couple of simple questions:

“Don't you feed your animals on the Sabbath?” “Shouldn't freedom be an integral part of the Sabbath?”

We have all read and seen the stories of those who misuse power. We see it in schools, where a small group of kids manage somehow to ensure that the other students follow their lead.

When my middle daughter, Cindy, was a freshman, one of boys in her crowd had a terrible crush on her. During PE one day, Eddie started teasing another boy about liking Cyn. Indignantly, the second boy protested that he wouldn't date her if she were the last girl on earth.

The other boys joined in and pretty soon there was a pact: None of these boys would ever ask her out. Before long, this pledge spread to the whole school.

Eddie confessed several years later. He was scared that Cindy would date one of the other boys but not him. He said he felt bad when he saw how sad and lonely Cindy was, but he couldn't figure out a way to fix things.

Oh, maybe some can laugh at their immaturity. But Cindy didn't laugh at them. She didn't laugh much in high school at all. So out of Eddie's fear of losing something – which he didn't even have – he wrecked an important part of someone else's life.

So, that is a poignant story about a kid. But what about “real life”? Where are the Eddie's and synagogue leaders in our world? Let me offer you a couple of examples,

and I think you can certainly find more.

Many people today are just as enraged about gay marriage as those synagogue leaders were about Jesus working on the Sabbath. Many say that they are afraid that Chris's and my marriage puts theirs in jeopardy. Changing the definition of marriage to include two consenting adults – not really much of a change if you do some research into the history of marriage – frightens them so much they will *give till it hurts* to take marriage away from Chris and me. They are really afraid – afraid enough to give a lot of money towards taking away my marriage.

This story isn't quite so poignant. And some of you might think about explaining gently to me that I shouldn't take this personally. But I do because it is.

Those supporting Prop 8 suffer from a fact problem, obviously – no one's marriage crashed because Chris and I (and 18,000 other queer people) got married. Straight people are no more likely to molest kids; straight people are no more likely to get divorced.

What might really happen is that more of our kids and spouses might announce they are gay. We may have to deal with our fears about our own sexuality. It took some of us gay folks decades to name our own selves and loves – we understand that fear.

These might be real fears for some. But people don't usually like to admit to fear. And admitting to fear about your sexuality is almost like admitting you're gay. And for many, that is a fate worse than death – perhaps one reason the suicide rate for gay teens, in particular, is so high.

Realizing that GLBT folks are real folks with real love, real hurt, real loneliness, real delight – that understanding is the first step to tolerance. But as we know, tolerance is far from love. And our God has commanded us to love everyone.

What else is there in real life? How about the immigration policy?

Many people are scared of losing what they have to people who sneak into the country. I hear worries about the strain on the schools and medical systems, and on the job market.

I'm sympathetic to those fears. I hate that California has poor schools and I hate that so many people can't afford good health care. And I have been laid off and know how hard it is to find a good job to support your kids. I've been homeless.

I've been playing around on Ancestry.com. I've found the tracks of my forbears who came here. At least two were indentured servants. I cannot find where they ever won their freedom, but it seems like their children continued to move West looking for a better life. Others came during times of famine and war, trying to find a better way for their kids to grow up.

I have these questions for us:

Does it necessarily follow that an increase in population requires a reduction in services?

How did we avoid that in the past?

Is there a way to welcome folks like my ancestors who ran or were dragged from England, Ireland, Germany without bankrupting the country?

This country has amazing resources. There is enough food grown in the US to feed every resident. Right now. We can do it. But we won't, because too many people fear the losses that the necessary changes may bring.

So, while I prepared this sermon, I thought easily of one "small" example and two bigger examples of how people today let their fears lead them to meanness. I suspect

you know of many others, where fear – sometimes unnamed and ill-defined – motivated cruelty.

Let's turn for a minute to the reading from Hebrews where we can think a little more about fear and our responses, and then we'll come back to the Gospel lesson.

"You haven't come to Mount Sinai, to something that can be touched, to fire, darkness, gloom, tempest, trumpet blast. At Sinai, a voice terrified them – Moses said he was shaking with fear.

"No, you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God. You have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, to countless angels celebrating, to a gathering of those who love God. You've come to God, the judge of all, and to the righteous. You've come to Jesus, the one who created a new way of relating to God and you've come to his blood, which tells a very different story than the blood of Abel tells.

"Pay attention to who is talking. Some have ignored God's words and God shook the earth. Now what is at risk is the shaking of heaven itself.

"And, God has for us an unshakable way of living. So, we can give God our reverence and awe. Because God is, after all, a consuming fire."

Do you see how the writer recasts God? At Mount Sinai, God gave the law and everyone trembled. The mountain belched fire and smoke and obedience was born of fear. But, obedience didn't last long, and when we broke the law, destruction followed. But Jesus redefined our lives. Abel's blood told of the results of Cain's fears of loss. Jesus' blood tells of love and giving. And we can revere God – not fear God – because God – not Mount Sinai or the law given there – is a consuming fire. This is cause for celebration not fear.

The leaders of the synagogue really thought that keeping those laws from Mount Sinai is what would keep them safe from the things they fear. They totally missed the point that the Sabbath was a way of having the whole society slow down one day a week, to relax and refresh themselves, to spend time in worship and praise, to remember God.

Freeing someone from bondage, in that context, is one of the best things you could possibly do on the Sabbath. Telling someone to "come back tomorrow, and we'll see about doing something for you" was not acceptable to Jesus. He set her free when he saw the need.

I don't want to miss the point like these guys did. I don't want to miss the point they way Eddie did. Or any of the others who are so afraid of loss that they'll hurt others – in small or large ways.

I often ask myself, "What am I afraid of?" The first time I went to Casa de Nacimiento, the birth center in El Paso, I had to face the fact that I was facing real losses that scared me. I was going from being an executive with a 25-year career and a 6-figure salary to being a lowly intern, cleaning up blood and poop and barf. It was a loss; I don't like being the low person on the totem pole.

I really struggled with this question when I realized I was falling in love with Chris. I faced the loss of my family and friends. The losses were real – I lost my two best friends and I lost a job as a result of coming out.

When I face and live through these losses, I remind myself of the resources I have. I ultimately remind myself that God loves me, and I don't have to be afraid of the losses – God will be with me in them.

We have a new way of relating with God. At Mount Sinai, Moses passed the law on

to the people. He was scared and they were scared. But at Mount Zion, we're attending a party with countless angels and really neat people. God is there. And so is Jesus – who threw this celebration.

You see, we needn't fear – we aren't coming to Sinai with its thunder and lightening. We are coming to Zion, where Jesus is dancing with a woman he healed on a Sabbath.

If you spend much time around almost any Christian church, sooner or later you will hear something about the tithe, the dreaded ten-percent “God tax” mandated for all in the Old Testament. What a dreary and inequitable way to look at stewardship—that part of our lives in which we examine how we deploy the resources that are under our control.

True stewardship recognizes that the goods, money, skills and other resources that we control are not for our use alone but for the good of all. As businessman and philanthropist Jon Huntsman said recently, “It has been clear to me since my earliest childhood memories that my reason for being was to help others. The desire to give back was the impetus for . . . founding what became a successful container company . . . We progressed from being leveraged to the eyeballs to realizing a degree of wealth of which we had never dared to dream, always with the understanding that it was not ours to keep.

Huntsman made these remarks in his response to Warren Buffett's and Bill and Melinda Gates' appeal to fellow billionaires to pledge at least half their money to charity. Buffett himself has already pledged to give 99 percent of his wealth to charity, claiming that one percent provides more than he and his family could ever want or need.

Another billionaire responding to the Buffet/Gates “Giving Pledge” challenge is the Bay Area's Lorry Lokey, who recounts how even during the Great Depression his parents consistently gave about eight percent of their \$2,200 annual income to charity. Lokey says he consistently gave about ten percent of his money away for years, until his income began to grow. Like Buffett, he's now giving over 90 percent to charity.

My guess is that no one at Saint John's can afford to give away 90 percent or even 50 percent of their income. But that's my point. There isn't a one-size-fits-all plan for how we should allocate the money and other resources God has given us. Some people can give lots, which is especially helpful in difficult times when overall charitable giving is down. Some people are struggling right now just to meet their basic needs.

The amount we give is a dynamic part of our overall spiritual life, a matter for prayer and thoughtful consideration. It is a core part of how we seek God's word and respond to God's call here at Saint John's. May God bless us with resources as we look for ways to use them for the benefit of the world.