

SIGH

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I don't know about you but I feel like I've been through something monumental this week. It's one of those feelings that you wake up with and have to search your memory for its source - oh, right, that. I feel like I, we, have been invaded by some overwhelming force against which we are powerless to effect; all I can do is watch or not - it didn't seem to make a difference - the heavy helpless feeling persisted; it then felt like we were witnessing the most rancorous divorce - with accusations, real outrage, mock outrage, trauma and fury, a bitter custody fight where we children will be worse off no matter which parent we end up with and a fierce battle over property which will continue to increase in value for generations. Regardless of who we end up with, who gets custody, something familiar and trustworthy, something we thought would always sober up and eventually do the right thing was gone, irrevocably, We children will need to fend for ourselves, no one is looking out for us anymore, we've been abandoned but are still somehow forced to watch the spectacle continue. The weight of the helplessness of watching something precious disintegrate has surprised me. So much that relief I feel when someone seemed to remember us children is wildly out of proportion. I felt, feel, like running to Jeff Flake arms outstretched yelling, "Daddy."

These events cast the tint of partisan politics over the words of Jesus in the gospel today. What we must remember and what is at the heart of the gospel is that Jesus is talking to all of us - that Jesus is defending our humanity, insisting on it even at the cost of a limb, the loss of an eye. Jesus so wants to stop us from following the path of hierarchy and division that he resorts to violent and extreme images. They are not punishments - they are portrayals of what happens to us when we separate ourselves others, from our shared and universal humanity, from our connection in sharing the same parent. It is where we came from not how we ended up that Jesus holds up as a guide for the human experience.

Remember Jesus is holding a child on his lap as he talks to the power seeking disciples. It isn't the child's cuteness that Jesus is lifting up; it is their vulnerability and dependence. Unlike the disciples who want to earn their recognition for the wonders they perform, the child Jesus holds has no bells and whistles to earn Jesus' love, no bargaining power to convince others that they deserve sustenance and shelter.

I sometimes think that the disciples were special - sacrificing their former lives to follow Jesus; letting go of worldly goods and values to spread the gospel. But when I hear words like John's today that feel so familiar to me I remember the disciples were a group of flawed humans; so much so that they didn't even know to put some spin on their hunger for power. I understand them. After all, the disciples were the ones with the direct connection to Jesus - they were the ones with the authority, the certificate, they were the ones who should be doing the casting out of demons. Others were just fakes, just trying to get the attention the REAL disciples deserved. Who do these fakers think they are passing themselves off as the real deal?

When we take on an identity that sets us apart from others, we can start seeing the world through the eyes of our office. A non-union healer who can cast out demons is experienced personally, as an insult,

a transgression, disrespectful toward the original. I imagine John expected to be praised by Jesus for his sharp eye and fervent defense of the Real followers of Jesus. All puffed up with the power and authority of his office, John must have been surprised if not embarrassed when Jesus chastised him for interfering.

We know that pride of the in-group which feels so good, often because it is a closed group, limited, a unique status coveted by others. From this elevated position we are tempted to put stumbling blocks in the paths of others who want to join us. Jesus knows this tendency in his disciples, knows the times they've tried to keep people away from him especially children; sometimes women. The crowds and cheers, the miracles and healings, these can go the disciples' heads and get them thinking that those 'little ones' are somehow less, somehow not fully human.

Jesus knows this tendency in us to separate ourselves from whole groups of people, whole religions, whole nationalities, whole genders. We think there are categories of being human - we hold onto our privilege, our authority, our position to define who we are. The idea that we might find ourselves without that edge is threatening, scary. The more we think others might be trying to claim that their humanity is as complete and valid as ours, the more tightly we hold onto our advantage.

As we put distance between ourselves and others, the freer we are to dehumanize them. The less we see others as like us the easier it is to take their children away, to regard their bodies as a plaything; to treat their physical labor as inferior to our white collar work; to limit, maybe even deny, their right to be heard, to be believed

This separation, this alienation, is destructive to us as well as it is to those we spurn. The gruesome consequences of our setting ourselves above: losing a hand, a foot, an eye - reflect the self harm of denying our own vulnerability; represent the chunk of our humanity we carve away when we set out our stumbling blocks. That's what happens when we decide others are not as fully human as we are That's what it looks like when we dismiss others as less than. We may appear self confident and puffed up - but the truth of us is that we are diminished. We are missing a central piece of our humanity and an essential part of our relationship with God.

It is only when we join Jesus in caring for the least, when we join the little ones in our need for Jesus; it is in loving the little ones and loving Jesus that we discover and can fully receive God's grace. Tony Robinson says that Claims of God's astonishing grace lie best on the tongues of the least, of those who know they absolutely, desperately, need God.

It is, for me, in events like those of this past week when I feel my need for God most keenly. Where else can we turn when the heaviness and the helplessness is so strong; when else do we share in the feeling of being held in Jesus' lap while the disciples are complaining of not getting proper recognition. Oh, and what a feeling of hallelujah it is, what a homecoming. And what a launching pad Jesus' lap is for us to seek out and destroy stumbling blocks; to leave the spectacle of ego and power and to turn, return to Jesus to do the work of clearing the path for his little ones. I'll close with a prayer from the Iona Community:

O God, bring us to silence that we may hear your voice in those calling from the edge. Move us to stand with them in speechless solidarity; write your love on our bodies that our living, not our lips, may sing your freedom song.