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### **Navigating the Waters of Truth Telling**

The gospel reading opens with not a very good impression of the disciples -- again. Last week we saw a glimpse of their posturing and competition when they were caught arguing about who among them would be the greatest. Today John turns to Jesus: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

John might as well have said: "Teacher, we saw someone out on the playground having fun, so we tried to stop him because he wasn't playing with us or playing the game the way we know it should be played." John comes across looking small and petty. Jesus pushes back to say in effect: why are you even worrying about that? We need all the help we can get. Let it be. Whoever is not against us is for us.

The disciples are perennial stand-ins for you and me in these stories we hear Sunday after Sunday. They have access and closeness to the human Jesus -- they eat with him, travel, laugh together -- and they still get it wrong sometimes. They miss the point and miss the mark. And that should be of some comfort to us when we do the same. None of us perfect. We all make mistakes, and given time and space to make amends, learn and grow, we can change directions.

Most of us, if honest, have ideas or expectations about how other people should live and behave and conduct themselves. It can annoy us -- OK, let me just own this: it can annoy me -- if others do not play the game as we believe it should be played or conduct themselves the way we think they should. (My own pet peeve is people talking loudly in theatres during a movie as if they were watching Netflix from the comfort of their home.)

We don't know why John and the others responded to the one casting out demons the way they did. Having just been consumed with a discussion about who is greatest among them, maybe they were feeling a bit insecure of their own standing -- their VIP access and closeness to Jesus. We will never know. But if they did feel threatened, it would have changed the way they acted and felt.

Remember not too long ago our church and our society was torn about the question of who could get married? We rarely ever talk about it anymore in this parish or even in New Hampshire because marriage equality has become commonplace and widely accepted. We are an inclusive church in New England, perhaps one of the more socially progressive areas of our country. That wasn't always the case.

When we started having the conversation about who could get married, it required us to look at marriage itself. Some people began and ended with a literal interpretation of the Bible. Genesis 2:24 -- Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. This was for centuries the understanding of what marriage was and for whom it was intended -- a man and a woman. And then, over time, a new understanding of marriage emerged. The "secret sauce," if you will, of marriage -- its essence -- is not based primarily on the opposite genders of its participants. It is based on the covenant, the commitment, the faithfulness of two people -- both made in God's image -- to love, support, comfort, and care for one another in good times and bad,

sickness and in health. People of faith began to see how two men or two women could be as married – as committed and joined together – as anyone else.

Our church, our denomination, was at the forefront of this change. And yet, it wasn't easy for everyone to accept let alone support. That is still true. Some of those who opposed this change made the case that a new definition of marriage would impact or perhaps even threaten their own. They often dug in. Change is a threat to the status quo and “the way it's always been.” Change as we know can disrupt and dislodge, unsettle and divide as much as it can inspire and fill us with hope that change is possible.

You have to know by now, after listening to my preaching after these five plus years, that I try to be measured about weighing in on every cultural and political topic that bubbles up and takes over the news and public conversation during a given week. The main role of a preacher as I see it is to illuminate – shed light upon – these ancient words so that they can be understood, take form, sink in and guide our thinking today and deepen our faith in God.

Take this past week for example. When we live through these many cultural moments – amplified by round the clock information and news -- as we have this past week with hearings over the Supreme Court nominee, I think it can be hard to make sense of all that we are taking in. Harder yet to hear how God's voice might be added into the mix and help us through these waters.

What we witnessed this past week was what we were told pitted one person's account of events against another person's – all in public view. We see most of things in our world through the lens of our experience. As a white, middle-aged male with a college education I do not see or experience life as someone who is not in my same context. But that is not the only way I see or experience the world. I also claim baptized Christian, husband and father.

The reason we can't lose sight of our faith in these moments is that without that grounding we can simply echo the divisions of our world and fall back into our self-selected group or tribe. “Whoever is not against us is for us” can turn into “Whoever is not for us is against us” and those are two very different ways of looking at the world. Trying to hear another person's story is hard. When and if we make a person or view point ‘the other,’ and once we go there it's hard to find our way back. The ‘other’ is harder to love, believe, trust or value.

We are witnessing an unmasking taking place in our society. A partial shedding of the protections and privileges of status and power. Women and some men are beginning to tell their stories of abuse and violence. Some are speaking about what happened to them – events and trauma etched upon their lives. This can cause fear of being wrongly accused. Remember one of the Ten Commandments: You shall not be a false witness. Modern translation: you should not commit perjury.

This past week I heard the voices of pain, trauma, violence, anger, rage, frustration and fear.

What is the message of the Gospel to those who have power and see it being challenged or threatened? Where are we to stand or what are to make of this moment?

None of this is easy. The work of transformation can be unsettling.

Mary the mother of Jesus has long been looked to for the words she spoke even before Jesus was born. God my savior has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

I don't believe Jesus wants us to remain neutral to the pain and conflict of our world.

Last week we heard: "whoever wants to be first must be last of all of and servant of all." At the very least, what I take that to mean is that the direction and destination of God's kingdom is one that lifts up those with little power, little to no voice and diminished roles. Pay attention to them. The last, the least, the lowly, the lonely and the lost: they have something to show us all about what it means to put one's life in the hands of God.

Jesus leaves us with some wisdom, this time about salt. Mark 9:50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Salt was highly prized and valued in Jesus time as a way to preserve food. Salt was a way to cleanse and keep something pure. And when it ceased to be salt, it wasn't worth much at all.

"Have salt in yourselves" can mean for us: believe in what is possible in you to make right what has gone astray and wrong. Each one of us has a voice and an experience to share.