

A NO WIN SCENARIO!



GENESIS 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67
PSALM 45
ROMANS 7:15-25a
MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Proper 9
July 9, 2017 ~ Year A



A NO WIN SCENARIO!

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold!)

On October 15, 1971, Richard Nader's Rock 'n Roll Revival concert was held at Madison Square Garden in New York City. Featuring many of the great rock 'n rollers from back in the day, it included the likes of Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and Bobby Rydell. Also among the celebrity musical guests was Rick Nelson, who came on stage dressed in the then in vogue fashion of the day, bell bottom slacks and a purple velvet shirt, with his hair hanging down to his shoulders. Shout out to Elvis for that hip fashion trend! You remember! Some of your kids made you crazy! I had hair down past my shoulders! I was a pretty boy! But, I digress; I often do! According to Wikipedia, where all such wisdom now resides, "He started playing his older songs like *Hello Mary Lou*, but then he played the Rolling Stones' *Country Honk* (a country version of their hit song *Honky Tonk Women*) and the crowd began to boo, perhaps not feeling the vibe. While some reports say that the booing was caused by police action in the back of the audience, perhaps spawned by an outbreak of weed, Nelson took it personally and left the stage. He watched the rest of the concert backstage and did not reappear on stage for the finale." Perhaps as a form of reflective self-therapy, or perhaps out of anger or spite, Nelson recorded the 1972 hit song *Garden Party*, putting prose to the events of that, what for him, was a terrible night. The refrain tells a story all its own, "But it's all

right now, I've learned my lesson well; You see, you can't please everyone, so you've got to please yourself." I wonder which life lesson number we have here? And, indeed, in so many ways, it is a lesson that all of us learns at some point in life as we mature and find our niche, gaining our personal equilibrium while learning to live in relationship in the many relationships that define our sphere of being in the world, no matter who we are or how much in control we believe ourselves to be! And, I will never forget the time when Santa Claus was once unmercifully booed off the football field during a game in Philadelphia, a town that infamously turned booing into an art form!

Well, it seems our friend Jesus faced a similar public relations nightmare. No matter what he did, what he said, or how he did it or said it, Jesus just could not win. He was constantly berated, ridiculed by his contemporaries, hit with a barrage of criticisms, ironically compared to his traditional, uptight forebears in the faith, as well as his peers, his Jewish counterparts, particularly faux colleagues such as the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. In today's Witness from the Gospels in Matthew we read where his frustrations get the better, perhaps even the best of him as he speaks to the crowds, reaching an emotional tipping point from which there was no return or recourse. But, before we look at what he had to say to them in that crucible moment, a little background is in order. In preceding texts Jesus had already been called Beelzebub, labeled the Prince of Demons, branded

as the prince of darkness, the devil incarnate himself, Satan personified. Ironically, this Prince of Peace had shockingly dared to carry a sword rather than a peaceful plowshare, demanding that any who would follow him must take up a cross not necessarily of their own choosing; and, now he is confronted with the reality that his favorite cousin, John the Baptizer, was now in Herod's prison. And, as we would soon learn, he would soon lose his head. Jesus described John as "the greatest person ever born!" Imagine that, coming from one who would be called Christ, Messiah, and every other divine adjective imaginable! That is how much Jesus loved John, revealing the depth of their close relationship. So, Jesus was not in a very good mood. In fact, you might say he was royally peeved!

Jesus had reached a boiling point and so he does what any normal human being would do under similar circumstances, he blows, goes postal! It is not a frequent occurrence in the Gospels, but it happens on occasion and when it does, look out everyone! In today's narrative, he says to the crowd and any who would listen, "Why did you go out to listen to John in the first place?" Was it to be entertained? Amused? To see a spectacle, a buffoon or carnival barker? To see a man dressed in such funny clothes, clownish, foolish looking in his camel hair girdle? No, Jesus reminded them, you went out to see a prophet, a real, bona fide, died-in-the-wool, throwback prophet of old, bringing back memories from back in the day, echoes of Elijah, Jeremiah, or Isaiah,

or for that matter a mixture of these legends of the faith combined. Throw in Moses and the Law for good measure! John's nostalgic prophetic preaching harkened back to the old-time religion, full of hellfire and brimstone, judgment, and repentance! For the old-timers who had long heard and read the stories, the same ones we read in the Hebrew scriptures, it was a Camelot moment come true! But, the funny thing is, according to Jesus, they apparently did not like John any more than they liked Jesus, a far kinder and gentler prophet! Old ways, new ways, no ways, highways, modern, postmodern, 19th, 20th, 21st century, did not matter, this crowd proved to be a tough sell, skeptical, even cynical to a fault, an impossible audience to please. Jesus asks, no doubt rhetorically, "To what will I compare this generation? It is like a child sitting in the marketplaces calling out to others, 'We played the flute for you and you did not dance. We sang a funeral song and you did not mourn.'" Folks, this is one upset dude! No good humor here! But, Jesus was not quite finished ranting, not yet done with his personal diatribe, adding for good measure and with much bravado and consternation to boot, "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'" But, enough about cousin John. What about me? "Yet the Human One (that would be Jesus) came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" Evidently, they called him every name in the book, from "A" to "Z"! You know the old saying, "Damned if you do, damned if you don't!" It is painfully obvious that Jesus had finally had

enough and so he vents, unloading with both barrels, dumping a big, heaping helping dose of verbal backlash, getting everything off his chest with an almost irrational tongue lashing on everybody within the sound of his voice! Feel the wrath, the white-hot heat. Experience the anger, the condemnation and judgment. “But it’s all right now, I’ve learned my lesson well; you see, you can’t please everyone, so you’ve got to please yourself.”

Suddenly, surprisingly, shockingly, a strange thing happens in the text with Jesus. It is as if he had a flashback, a whiplash kind of reality check, or a strong whiff of smelling salts. He quickly snapped back to reality, stopping in midstream, midstride, calming down and coming to himself, gathering himself and his senses, getting in his right mind, remembering who he was, whose he was, and what he was about, his real business at hand. It is as if Jesus counts to ten, taking deep breaths while exhaling—one, one hundred; two, one hundred; three, one hundred. As Patrick is prone to tell me in my anxiety driven moments around here, “Breath in, breath out!” Always good advice! Jesus “stops on a dime” as we are known to say, his anger fading, seeming to vanish in a nanosecond, in the twinkling of his very observant eyes. His tone radically, dramatically shifts. His demeanor quickly calms as he regains his personal equilibrium. The conversation literally changes on the fly seamlessly in this text, as seemingly out of nowhere Jesus begins to coherently, rationally, speak of wisdom, using the feminine

divine image from the Hebrew scriptures, Sophia, even pausing long enough to offer what surely was a centering prayer to God, the one he thought of as his daddy, the one he called Father, Abba. He says, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you’ve hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have shown them to babies. Indeed, Father, this brings you happiness.” Jesus is reminded that this fickle flock is like “sheep without a shepherd,” chicks without a mother hen, remembering that they really were an ignorant sort, in so many ways a bunch of religious lemmings, knowing no better than to say the things they say and do the things they do, so often the epitome of bad behavior. Just because you think it, does not mean you ought to say it! And, then if this new conversation was not strange, not surreal enough, Jesus then says to all those gathered, the same people at whom he is so disappointed, so angry and frustrated, so seemingly full of outright hostility and unbridled contempt, “Come to me, all you who are struggling hard, (are) carrying heavy loads—the King James eloquently says “heavy laden”—and I will give you rest, rest for your weary souls. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I’m gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.” It is as if Jesus is giving his own spontaneous version, his own adaptation, his own rendition of the 23rd Psalm, a beautiful interpretation if indeed it was one, complete with still waters and green pastures even in shadows of deepest, darkest, and most depressed death tinged valleys. It is always the darkest before the

dawn! From anger and a verbal lashing, perhaps even bordering on abuse, Jesus immediately gathers himself and goes back to being his old, affable self, the full embodiment of love and compassion, grace and mercy, expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, “extravagantly welcoming.”

No doubt Jesus had learned a valuable lesson about living, “Don’t let “those people” get you down!” You know the real phrase! You have heard it many times before! It is clear from this text and from what we learn about Jesus as we watch him in action, is that he was a well-grounded individual, fully in touch with who he was and what he was about as an individual engaging others while seeking and initiating change. He had an integrity of being that totally consumed his personhood and allowed, enabled him to deescalate toxic and tumultuous situations, diffusing tension at its every raw, rough, and ragged turn. Jesus’ life, as much as his teachings, his mission and ministry, exemplified what we in clinical terms call a non-anxious presence. It was said of the late musician Janis Joplin that she possessed “emotional honesty.” Add in intellectual honesty and that would be an apt description of Jesus, fully integrated integrity of being. Never forget, God is the creator of our capacity to feel, to think, and is responsible for the emotional drive that helps us form who we are created in the divine image. How much better our lives would be, on a daily basis, if we could learn not to sweat the small stuff and the small people. So simple, but so hard to do! As someone once articulated, “Tough times do not last; tough people do!” Yes, Jesus got angry

and frustrated, annoyed in every way. Just ask the money changers in the Temple on that fateful day when he went postal, wildly confronting these unwitting, unwilling, and no doubt unsuspecting adversaries! He never laid a hand on any of them, but he sure put a hurt on their business that day with his hand fashioned whip. But, despite the certain difficulty, he had learned how to manage his anger, and his temper—yes, Jesus had one—and knew not to let the sun set on it or with it. And, he knew how to overcome it. In the final analysis, Jesus had an amazingly integrated personality that lent itself to an incredible integrity of being, giving him crystal clarity about who he was and about his life’s purpose, the meaning behind the man. His life was anything but compartmentalized; that nonintegrated approach to living where danger always lurks, that has nothing but bad karma written all over it because it does not allow every aspect of one’s being to inform every other aspect of one’s being, the proverbial right hand and left hand oblivious to one another and thus never in sync. Even so, in all honesty Jesus was and remains a very polarizing figure, and I use this sobering reality as a most complementary adjective, in actuality, a term of sincere flattery and fondness, earnest endearment. His transparency, his clarity and conviction forced from everyone he encountered and engaged a decision about his message, his mission and ministry. Jesus reached out to all persons, welcoming, inviting everyone into his life and his experience, but history shows that he was not for everybody. The proof of the pudding is blatantly shown in the eventual and inevitable path he took, the cruel cross he ultimately chose for himself. Jesus’ transparency, his crystal clarity of

thought and emotion allowed him to engage persons of all stripes and all persuasions, never playing favorites, never manipulated, triangulated, or hijacked and held hostage in any way, never showing bias or ill will, the prejudices and stereotypes that haunt all of us at some time or other in our lives, always a constant threat to our best selves. He never compromised or leveraged himself because of his unique identity, his special DNA, or his particular twenty-three pairs of chromosomes. You have probably seen the “23 and Me” commercials! In today’s text, we see how quickly Jesus lets “things” go, evaporating from his system like the proverbial water falling off a duck’s back. He never holds a grudge, never lets the sun set on his anger. It is a not so lightly a gift in our human capacity, our human being!

But, there is another takeaway today that I see as a companion to Jesus’ innate and amazing ability to deflect crazy, the nuttiness that always seemed to surround him wherever he went. It was his uncanny ability to love, to exhibit an abiding and steadfast, “wasteful” love even in the midst of religious and societal angst and the deepest of his own personal anguish. One of the things that I tell my Bible study classes is that, “The Bible will tell you everything you need to know about a text if you are open and allow it to do so.” Look at today’s text. Jesus is clearly demonstrably angry and let’s everyone who has ears to hear know his anguish in no uncertain terms. He speaks clearly and frankly. As some would say, he was both frank and earnest, two great names, and all at the same time! Jesus said what he meant and meant what he said and he said it in the way it needed to be said, with

clarity and conviction, with no willy-nilly wavering or waffling, and yet somehow still managed to say it in an appropriate way and all in the appropriate moment, the crucible time and place to speak and act. And, then he let it all go, once again gladly and freely giving himself away!

In today's lesson, literally in one sentence we read of Jesus' anger, hurt, and hostility, and then in the very next sentence Jesus is back to being his normal, usual self, the loving and embracing Jesus of whom we have grown so accustomed that we simply take him and his for granted because he and it are so familiar. The very people Jesus has just reamed out, "ripped a new one" as we are prone to say, he now says with open and loving arms to come to him, to gather around his person and his way. He acknowledges their pain, their troubling, oft conflicted situations, for they were an oppressed, an occupied people under Roman rule. Life, everyday life was tough, hard, a daily grind. He offers care, comfort, and compassion and the kind of succor that can only come from a Godly, a God-like kind of divine love. He tells his listeners whose hearts are burdensome and heavy laden, who are struggling hard—what a stark and sobering image that is—those who are carrying heavy loads, whatever they might be, to come and share that load with him because his yoke is easy and his burden is light. It may be your cross to bear, whatever it may be, however ugly and difficult its ugly head rears—broken or estranged relationships, illness, death, you and perhaps only you alone know what you carry—but Jesus

promises he will help you bear it. He will help carry it. He will walk with you on the journey until you reach your final destination.

But, there is something even more interesting, more intriguing, lurking in his words. Remember, this is someone who just went on a rant, a screaming fit! He tells his hearers to learn from him. It was a great lesson then and a great lesson now and that lesson is a lesson in how to manage life's emotional roller coasters. In the Book of Ephesians (4:26) Paul tells his reader, "In your anger do not sin." Another translation declares, "Don't let anger control you!" And, still another, "Be angry and do not sin!" And, then adds this sage advice, "Do not let the sun set upon your anger!" In today's Matthew text Jesus models that very behavior. He says, "learn from me." It is an admonition to do as he says and as he does, an always difficult proposition in our human endeavors. It is always challenging to be like Jesus, to practice grace upon grace. Nobody is perfect in the way we are called to strive for perfection in the Bible! WWJD (What would Jesus do?) is an easy question to ask with an all too frequently impossible answer! Inquiring Christian minds want to know! Jesus' healthy confrontational ability along with his cool, calm, and collected demeanor is a reminder to all of us about how to be in relationship, in the broader community and in our local context as the SouthShore United Church of Christ, how to be in beloved faith community, siblings all, brothers and sisters of every make and model.

May SouthShore United Church of Christ ever be and ever become a place where, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey,” you are not only welcomed and included, but you are supported in your struggles, especially when they are hard, that you are undergirded when you are carrying heavy loads—because folks, I understand that all of us are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads in some way or another. So, let us put on the yoke made easy in Jesus, bearing a burden that is light, and may we ever and always learn from the one whose lessons lead to life and light, balance and wholeness, integrated being born of integrity always fully immersed, completely saturated in love. May it be so among and within us. O God, may it be so, may it ever be so!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and whose yoke is easy, whose burden is light, and who gives rest for our souls, our weary souls, especially when we are struggling hard and when we are hardly struggling, and when we carry our heaviest loads, all the while teaching us how to live and love in the world, and especially and particularly with one another and with everyone else, until the reign and realm of God is recognized in our midst and everywhere else on earth as it is in heaven. Amen and amen.

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