

PENTECOST 2B 2024
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
Wilmington, Delaware
June 2, 2024

One Sunday back when I was an organist, I finished the postlude and was standing at the doorway to the men's robing room. That door was on the way to the fellowship room where coffee hour was well under way. A person whom I did not recognize approached me, as I was the only person in sight still wearing vestments. She introduced herself as a visitor, and then said, "where I come from no one leaves the nave while the candles are still burning. They're supposed to be praying. Yours are still burning, and everyone else left."

It seems the acolytes became occupied with other things and forgot to extinguish the candles, which was a fairly common occurrence there. And Altar Guild folks hadn't gotten around to that part yet. Anyway, my response was "Then you should still be in the church praying." Needless to say, she made it to coffee hour before I did.

Later on, as a priest, I served a parish that had the same ideas. I thought about asking the acolytes to not extinguish the candles after the service ended, because it was a place known as the most angry parish in the diocese. I wanted to tell them that the candles would keep burning until they treated each other with the same respect as they treated candles. I've grown a bit more of a spine since then.

Today we have lessons that seem to offer opposing views. Our first lesson, from Samuel's early days, seems to say that if we don't follow the rules, then bad things are going to happen. Then, in the Gospel lesson, Mark seems to tell us that some rules were made to be, if not broken, at least somewhat bent.

It's an issue we have faced since the 1979 Book of Common Prayer was published. Whereas the "old" prayer book was fairly straightforward in many of its rubrics, the one we have now uses that nebulous word "may." The Celebrant *may* say whatever words follow. The people *may* kneel or stand for any given prayer. While we are known for our pew aerobic exercises, the rubrics, or instructions, give us some flexibility. Individual parish traditions may have established some guidelines, but there's that word again. Since we've gotten rid of the rope line at the door, not everyone has the same experience.

Now that I think of it, perhaps putting a rope line at the door might cause passers-by to consider there's something here worth standing in line for. There is, but we haven't done a good job of getting that word out. But then we might need bouncers as well as greeters, which means some of you would need to spend more time at the gym for appearances' sake. More rubrics.

Today's Gospel is Mark's first mention of religious authorities aligning themselves with political authority in order to do something with this non-conformist

from Nazareth. Jesus has questioned (in public!) their strict rules about Sabbath observance, even though picking a few grains of wheat from the stalks while walking by is very different from harvesting the whole crop. But, then, the Pharisees are looking for something to complain about, something they can use against others to point out their own superiority.

Then Jesus uses a mysterious phrase that would get everyone's attention. He calls himself the "Son of Man."

Other evangelists use this title for Jesus. And we spend a lot of time trying to figure out what it means. It's not new for us, just as it would have been familiar to anyone in Jesus' time who studied and taught the scriptures. The title Son of Man has apocalyptic meaning, as it reaches beyond our understanding of family relationships into an expression of one whose identity reaches beyond mortal experience.

There seems to be a lot of confusion around the title "Son of Man." Sometimes it just means what it says, a child of a human being. But I'm going to wander into some speculation as I wonder whether the phrase sometimes means more than that. Hebrew Scripture usage of the phrase "son of man" often refers to a heavenly being who protects in times of danger, or of one who delivers a message. You might think of angels, and, indeed, that is the term used by many of our English translations of scripture.

Then there are more dramatic events. As a child I often heard of three men who were punished for not obeying the order to worship false gods. The story is in the Book of Daniel. The three men are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Those are Babylonian names given to them during the exile under King Nebuchadnezzar. They are bound and thrown into a furnace where the fire is stoked to be seven times hotter than normal. It's so hot that the accusers who get close enough to throw the men into the fire are themselves killed by the heat around it. To this day I'm not exactly sure whether this story was taught so often so we might be faithful, or what might happen if we disobeyed. More rules.

But these three are not harmed. They are seen walking freely in the fire, and accompanied by a fourth being, who is sometimes called a "son of man." This is a messianic figure who arrives to provide protection from the flames, a result so effective that after they walk out of the furnace Shadrach and friends don't even have a faint aroma of barbecue.

So when Jesus uses the title "Son of Man" about himself, is he pointing out to his accusers that their complaints are actually against his true identity, and therefore against God?

As we will hear in coming weeks from Samuel, and as scripture tells us time and again, our strict adherence to rules and rituals might often reveal that we are in opposition to God. And while doing that, we are doing the opposite of what Paul tells the Church in Corinth. We proclaim ourselves instead of proclaiming God. We

announce to others that grace is not as important as strict obedience. We turn that sixth day of creation on its head, attempting to create others in our own image. And we break commandment number one. We worship a god we create, instead of being a faithful child of the God who creates all life.

And when we find ourselves in that position, then how we obtain food becomes more important than whether the hungry are fed. When we hold fast to regulations and rituals, there is no room for healing and wholeness, and the whole body begins to wither in imitation of the man's hand shown to Jesus that day in the synagogue.

There is an often overlooked sentence near the end of John's Gospel. It comes in the farewell discourse, when Jesus is giving his final teachings to his followers before his arrest and crucifixion. In effect, Jesus says that he's given his disciples all they're able to handle at that point. But there's more. That "more" will be given by the Holy Spirit when Jesus' disciples are ready, or, actually, when the Spirit is ready to give it to us. As our own history shows, the Spirit is often more ready to give than we are to receive.

Does this mean that everything new is from God? Probably not. But to reject something, or someone, because of newness or distinct differences is only one way of protecting ourselves from seeing God at work with us. It is our way of looking at the Son of Man as just another person instead of hearing and seeing with eyes of faith. Devotion to candles is no substitute for living relationships of grace and forgiveness.

There's a purifying fire waiting for each of us in some way. In the Spirit of the Son of Man, may our presence in it be our path to true freedom, our lives after it be signs of the presence of the living God.