

Sermon

The Rev. Noah Van Niel

September 16th, 2018

Proper 19 (B): Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-8; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

*Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one:
Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot
A constant habit; that when I would not
I change in vows, and in devotion.*

Those are the opening lines of Holy Sonnet XIX by the 17th century Anglican priest and poet, John Donne. No other poet, at least in my opinion, was as good at capturing the warring “contraries” that meet in a single soul—the “inconstancy” that seems inscribed in the DNA of every human being. In fact, *inconstancy*, he says, is the only *constant* thing about him. Against his own will and desire, he changes in “vows and devotions,” *vexed*, as it were, by his fate to be fickle. It’s a theme articulated rather pointedly here but it also lies at the heart of much of his other poetry and spiritual writings.

I experienced this same frustration at my own inability to remain true to my highest wishes and desires, when I was coming to faith as a teenager. The seemingly uncontrollable inconstancy of my words and whims was a major source of angst for me. I wanted (most of the time) to be good, to do good, and to say good things. But no sooner would I commit myself to a day of niceness and graciousness than I would be sniping at my mother for this, that or the other, or cursing a friend turned foe for this reason or that. I would frighten myself with my ability to speak both blessing and cursing from the same mouth, pouring forth both brackish water and fresh from the same heart, as James said. I felt like I was a living, breathing contradiction. And during those years I found in God and in the Church a constancy and comfort my soul was longing for. Now it is not uncommon for teenage years to be full of angst and contrariness. Emotionally, physically, spiritually they are turbulent times. But truth be told, while the extremity of the emotions has regulated, I still find myself vexed by this very thing: the contraries that meet in my own heart. Despite all my best efforts, I’ve yet to outgrow them, let alone cure them. And they are still, in large part, what keeps me coming to church after all these years.

Perhaps that is why I’ve always liked Donne’s poetry. He is a faithful friend similarly frustrated by his own contradictions. And perhaps that is also why I have always liked the Letter of James. In passages like we have this morning, there is a bluntness that I appreciate; an honesty about the human condition and the way in which our tongues—those unruly little beasts—can utter words of beauty and at the same time be, “a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” “With it we bless the Lord and Father,” he says, “and with it we curse those who are made in the image and likeness of God.” It is good to read these ancient words and know I am not the first person to be vexed by their own inconstancy.

And I suppose that is also why I have always had a soft spot in my heart for Peter, the leader of the disciples who wore his passion and his imperfections on the same sleeve. There is no better example of the contrariness inherent in him than in this morning’s Gospel passage. Jesus asks the disciples on the road, “Who do people say that I am?” Curious, perhaps, about how people are making sense of all the remarkable things they are seeing and hearing. They say, “John the Baptist, Elijah, another one of the prophets come back to life.” But those are old wineskins, and Jesus is new wine. He is something, *someone*, who was hoped for but never before seen; hinted at but until then never revealed. There is no past figure who could be all that he is. So he asks more directly, “But who do *you* say that I am? You who know me best, have seen me most, whom I love and teach, who am I to you?”

“*The Messiah*,” Peter answers. This may seem obvious to us now, but at that juncture this was an incredible statement of faith. To say that this man with whom they are talking is the chosen one of God, the anointed one; the one and only; the Christ; the one for whom an entire nation has been waiting for thousands of years those, that is bold. In these two words he is saying that all God’s promises were coming true in this one man, with whom they were walking down a dusty road. It is a stunning realization. But what is even more stunning was what followed. With a hush in his voice,

Jesus begins to explain what that all means—what is prophesied would happen to The Messiah. Not the earthly triumph and political kingdom the people of Israel may have longed for under their Roman oppressors. No, this was a new Messiah model. And as the Messiah, Jesus says, it is necessary for him to undergo great suffering, in order to unlock the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers through his death and resurrection. And Peter, the same Peter who just a moment ago was uttering the most profound statement of faith that one can utter—“Jesus is the Christ”—begins to rebuke him, scold him, for saying these things. From the same mouth—blessing and cursing; fresh water and salt. And for this, Jesus turns and calls him Satan in front of all his friends. That’s a quick turnaround. *Oh to vex me, contraries meet in one.*

In my 3+ years here, one of the themes I have returned to repeatedly in my preaching is the reality of our complicated and convoluted natures as human beings. Our tradition has some strong words for it: our sinful nature, the evil that lurks in our souls, the darkness that surrounds us. Those can strike the ear harshly, so I’ve often tried to soften the blow by saying something like “our goodness and our less than goodness.” But the point is the same: we have in us the capacity to pour forth blessing and cursing and we do both. We put forth mixed messages because we are mixed messengers. The lesson this morning from James, embodied in Peter’s actions in our Gospel, is that our words matter. They reflect character. They reveal the ugliness in us and the beauty in us. We have to own our words. We all say stupid things. We all make mistakes, James says. None of us is perfect. But while we may not always mean what we say, that’s because we do not always mean to be who we are—creatures with a dual capacity for good and ill. We need to reckon with that.

We need to reckon with that because that is the starting point for spiritual growth. And growth in God, becoming more like Christ in our lives, is what this life of faith is all about. And that process begins with honesty. In order to make any progress in tipping the balance towards blessing and away from cursing, we have to confront the reality of our shortcomings; those parts of us that are still far from Christ-like. I have returned to the theme of our “goodness and less than goodness,” again and again not to depress you, or cut you down, or make you feel guilty or unworthy, but to help awaken an awareness of the ways in which we still have room to grow. Because this honesty leads to an awareness of our need for God; an awareness that we still have so much work to do on ourselves and in our world. And that need leads, to desire, a desire to do the work necessary to improve in our daily life and work. And ultimately that desire leads us to faith, because no matter how much we may want to be more Christ-like so the world may be more Kingdom-like, we soon recognize that that work will only be accomplished by the grace of God, not by our own efforts and strength alone. We need God to serve God. That’s why I’ve returned to this theme of our imperfections and inconstancy again and again. To spur us on to deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, that our lives may more and more conform to his and this world may more and more conform to the Kingdom he came proclaiming.

So the only way I know to address the vexation brought on by our constant inconstancy is to stare it straight in the eye so that we might be honest about who we are and bring ourselves before God and ask Him to help us, to *heal* us, because we cannot heal ourselves.

There’s a particular prayer in our prayer book that I love and it speaks to this very point I am trying to make. It’s a prayer that John Donne would have known as it dates all the way back to the prayer books he used as the Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London in the 1600’s. I like to imagine that it was one of his favorites too, as so much of his writing seems undergirded by its message. I can imagine him reciting it as he ascended to that lofty pulpit or sat at his wooden desk, a man filled ultimately with more faith than fickleness. It’s not a complicated prayer—it’s as simple as it is profound. It’s a prayer that speaks to our need for God to be the one who helps shore up those cracks and crevices that keep us from the holiness and righteousness He calls us to. It’s a prayer that places us properly in orientation to God—humbled and hopeful. And it just happens to be the collect appointed for today. So let us pray: *O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*