

Pearls from Sand.

The life of an oyster is not too shabby. They spend their lives in beds, with mouths wide open, and sucking in whatever plankton happens to be drifting by. Just about the only bad thing that might happen to them in the course of their life— that is, aside from being harvested, shipped off to oyster bars, and eaten alive— is for a grain of sand, or maybe even a parasite, to get into their shell and begin to “irritate” them.

At this point, the oyster can do one of two things: ignore the source of the irritation, which probably means eventual death, or protect itself by covering the source of the irritation with the same material which lines the inner surface of the oyster shell— a material called nacre, or mother of pearl. In other words, the oyster can respond to the irritant by making a pearl. And that pearl, that by-product of an encounter between the oyster and that grain of sand, or that parasite, turns out to be a thing of beauty and value.

Now, at this point, a lesser preacher, would give in to the temptation to developing a sermon whose eventual moral or punch-line would be “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” And they would argue how God’s role in the life of a person who is trying to juggle more than their fare-share of lemons, is to inspire them and guide them into converting their lemons— converting their trials and tribulations— into that proverbial lemonade. But I’m not going to go there. I think most of you here already know how to make lemonade. Instead, I’m going to take my “sand into pearls” metaphor, and point it in another direction.

And that takes me to today’s gospel reading. It presents us with a grain of sand. It presents us with a bit of irritation; with something that is seemingly innocuous, but which can give us something to worry over. And once we recognize it, it becomes an irritant that will not go away.

Now, that source of irritation, happens to be well-hidden in this morning’s gospel reading. In it, Jesus is praying for all of his followers. He prays for our unity. He prays for our joy. And for our safety, and protection. And then, Jesus

says that we are not of the world; however, we are to remain in the world, because our ministry is to be in the world, and our ministry is to be for the world.

But remember, when Jesus uses the word “world” here, he’s not talking about the created order: you know, earth, air, fire, water. Rather, he’s talking about that portion of human society which strives to meet its own needs, even at the expense of others. And he’s talking about that portion of human society which often, if not always, stands against the purposes and goals of God.

And Jesus says that the world will hate his followers, because his followers are not of the world. They will be hated because they are different. Because they follow “a different drummer.” And this hatred is to be the fate of virtually all who follow Jesus. They stand apart from the crowd, because they don’t really fit in with the crowd.

I mentioned earlier that today’s gospel reading presents us with a piece of grit, a grain of sand. Well, that irritant comes in the form of a question implicit in that reading, which is: “When was the last time the world hated you because you belong to Jesus and not to the world? When was the last time your faith so set you apart, that you were met with anger, contempt, or ridicule?” Now, what I’m about to say is something on the order of a confession. When asked this question, my answer is this: “Well, some days I have a hard time remembering.” Maybe you’re like me.

Now, I’m not suggesting that we’ve been commissioned to be a thorn in the world’s paw, or a burr under its saddle, or what have you. But our gospel reading nevertheless raises a very irritating question: “Is our faith making any difference in the world? Is it causing even a ripple in the lives of the people around us? Or have we become so totally caught up by the world that we’re just going with the flow?” It’s like that old question: “If being a Christian were illegal, would there be enough evidence to convict us?” You know, I hate questions like this!

I think, in some ways, it was easier for the people in the early church to deal with questions like this. Back then, when the church was being persecuted by a pagan culture, the distinctions between “them” and “us” were a whole lot clearer. For example, back then Christians couldn’t attend the public games, they couldn’t hold certain jobs or offices, they couldn’t join the army, and so on. And, often, the world really hated— I mean literally hated— the followers of Jesus, and ridiculed them, and everyone pretty much knew why.

But it's not so easy these days. Even modern attempts to create lists of things that Christians shouldn't be doing, or things we shouldn't be saying, or places we shouldn't go— codes of conduct that distinguish us from them— have for the most part been pretty silly, and pretty ineffective. And we Episcopalians have occasionally been fairly smug in pointing out that we aren't like those other people— you know, the Baptists, and such— who say you can't dance, you shouldn't wear make-up, or you mustn't go to movies. Sometimes, we're pretty pleased that we're not like them.

But have you ever noticed that no one really seems to be taking us to task on that? Instead of spending so much time and energy trying to establish God's disapproval for dancing or movies or makeup, I think they could really shake us up if they simply responded to our self-righteous lack of lists with one simple question. What if they asked: "OK, have your martini, and go to the dance, but before you do, tell me how does your faith affect your life? Show me, in ways that are concrete, how your faith makes a difference in this world." That is the grit with which so many of us Episcopal oysters have to contend.

And sometimes, when somebody actually has the wherewithal to ask us that question, rather than dealing with it directly, we try to deflect it. We respond by saying, well, it's the church's job to fix the world— it's the church's mission to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and visit the afflicted. That's not my job; I'm just one person.

But then, we have a reality check, we take a good look into the mirror, and think, maybe it is my job. And so, from time to time, we'll look around and see what we can do.

Now, on one level, these reality checks are a good thing. I mean, they get us out of our La-Z-Boys. They get us to engage the world, and try very hard to make things better. And these are things we need to do. But we need to be clear about what it means when we do these things.

Because I've found that it's easy to forget that God does not call us to be powerful or effective— at least, not in the way the world understands those words. Rather, God calls us to be faithful; to live his life, and follow his steps. And it makes sense, if you think about it. Of the twelve disciples, it was the one who betrayed Jesus— it was Judas— who was the most effective at using money and influence to get what he wanted. So, just trying to fix things, and being able to fix things, doesn't necessarily get rid of all our problems.

Well, as I said before, our gospel reading throws a lot of grit, a lot of sand, a lot of irritants in our direction. Jesus says that we are to be in the world but not of the world. But we aren't given a lot of directions to tell us how to do that. But still, we do know that the way we treat each other, and the way we treat our bodies, and our time, and our money— and anything else we may call “mine”— these are, and always will, remain important.

And so, Jesus calls us to be like oysters, which, at first blush, sounds pretty good. Until we remember that, eventually, sand is probably going to get kicked in our faces. And at that point, we need to be about the task of making that sand into pearls. And that means we need to look honestly at the world around us, and ask God who he needs us to be, and what he needs us to do. And that means making choices. Sometimes, tough choices. And, in the end, we may discover that Jesus was right; that, in being the people he calls us to be, in trying to convert this grain of sand, or that grain of grit, into a pearl, the world may not appreciate our efforts, or it may even hate us, or at the very least be irritated by us. But Jesus promises to pray for us always, and to be with us always.

But, as we contend with the world, and try to convert all those bits of sand into pearls, maybe we'll discover that, by our example, we've enabled others to grow a few pearls as well.

This message was inspired by a sermon offered by the Rev. James Liggett in 2006.