

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the tenth Sunday after Pentecost 2020: "imperfect heroes, part 1"

If you see the Buddha in the road, kill him.

Please don't be alarmed. This famous sentence is definitely not a negative slur on Buddhism. Quite the opposite, in fact. In the Zen tradition of Buddhism, one of the common spiritual practices is to contemplate statements that are, on the surface, nonsensical. The sentence, "If you see the Buddha in the road, kill him," is one the better-known statements of this kind. The contemplation is meant to break down inner barriers and bring the seeker more deeply into the divine mystery.

A statement such as this one might, however, seem pretty foreign and jarring to Christian ears. Thanks more to liturgy and tradition than to actual Scripture, we have been trained to think and speak of the pioneer and perfecter of our faith in purely reverential terms. We think and speak of Jesus as the universal Christ, and we often gloss over the complex human being revealed to us in the Gospel texts. We use terms such as "perfect" and "holy" all over the place in our worship and prayer, but we rarely apply words such as "frail" or "fickle." We certainly would never be found making a statement like, "If you see Jesus in the road, kill him."

Now, as long as we're conscious of what we're doing and why we're doing it, there's nothing wrong with this at all. It's been part of Christian tradition and practice for nearly as long as there has been such a thing as church, and with good reason.

But I believe that we sometimes aren't so conscious of what we're doing, and in that case it may wind us up in some trouble.

Take, for instance, the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. We heard just the beginning of that story today, and next week we'll hear its conclusion.

Joseph is a favorite of lots of people, especially people who are historically downtrodden. He's the classic rags-to-riches story! Thanks to an inflated ego and a smart mouth on his part, his brothers hate him enough to want to kill him. Instead of that, though, they sell him into slavery. After a bunch of twists and turns in the plot, he ends up becoming second only to Pharaoh in Egypt during a time when seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of famine. He is essentially the lord of the land.

But...there's an often neglected feature of the plot that comes at this point. As the seven years of famine unfold, Joseph slowly and methodically forces the people of Egypt to sell all of their belongings, their land, and ultimately themselves into slavery under Pharaoh. In other words, Joseph enables the Egyptians to survive the famine, but in doing so he places them in exactly the same low state out of which he escaped earlier in his life. This does not sound like the behavior of an epic hero.

Neither does the behavior of St. Peter in today's Gospel. Peter is supposed to be perfect, right? He is, after all, the rock upon which Christ founded his church. But in today's Gospel story, we

hear of a Peter with weak faith, one who sank into the sea as soon as he saw the severity of the wind and waves.

This is where we often stumble. We want our Bible heroes, probably all of our heroes, to be perfect. We tend to gloss over the words and behaviors that don't fit into that model of perfection. We replace the real people and real events with false archetypes that satisfy our desire for flawless heroes.

The trouble is that this ends up giving us a false picture of God and of how God works in the world of human affairs. Do you remember that great Gospel story where someone approaches Jesus and addresses him as "good teacher?" Jesus response is "Why do you call me good? There is only one who is good."

Jesus isn't just exhibiting some false humility here. He's making a profound theological statement. If you're looking for perfection, he says, you're going to have to look higher than anything or anyone you're going to find here on earth.

I think that the Zen Buddhists are really onto something with the practice of contemplating absurd and nonsensical statements until our minds can finally transcend them. Here in our earthly existence, if we dig deep enough, everyone and everything will ultimately be absurd and nonsensical. If we're searching for the perfection of beauty and love, which is exactly what we should be doing, everyone and everything here on earth will disappoint us.

Well gee, Andy, you're a real downer!!! Hold on, though...there's a bright side to this.

Remember that in multiple places Scripture makes a very clear promise. Those who seek God, those who seek pure truth, pure beauty, pure love with dogged determination, will ultimately be rewarded for their efforts. Scripture says this unequivocally in many places.

But that's a lofty goal and an impossibly high promise, isn't it? If we really stop and think about it for a moment, it means that no matter how high we climb, there will always be higher to go. It means that as finite creatures we will never fully reach the heights to which we are called, but at the same time it means that there is no limit to how high God will let us climb. We will eternally find the invitation to get closer to the divine heart open to us.

One of the main obstacles that might get in our way along this path, however, is if we think we have already found perfection in someone or something and therefore stop reaching higher. This is perhaps why, as unsatisfying as it might be initially, we keep getting fed a steady stream of imperfect heroes.

Yes, Joseph did some great things, but he also sold the common people of Egypt into slavery. Yes, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Cesar Chavez, and so many others made some profoundly wonderful impacts on human lives and

human history. But, if we dig deep enough, every single one of them also said and did things that may give us serious pause.

I am sure that the same thing can be said of each of our personal heroes. Parents, teachers, mentors, and lovers are people to be treasured, but I would bet everything I own that every single one of these has disappointed you at some point along the way, and, if they haven't, they will unless one deliberately ignores the evidence of their imperfection.

But what if this is a gift? What if this is God's way of ensuring that we aim for the real prize, not a cheaper version of it? Our infinite God has invited us finite creatures to climb to infinite heights. We'll never keep up our stamina to do this if we succumb to the temptation to settle for a finite plateau.

This is an extremely important message for a time such as this. Probably none of you really needs to be reminded of how imperfect the people and things of creation are. People and institutions upon whom we thought we could always rely are right now showing that, when placed under enough stress, they can and will collapse. But, behind it all, often seemingly hidden in the shadows, there is One whose defenses are too strong to succumb to any assault, and that One still invites us higher up and further in.

So yes, this is a time when the imperfection we see in even our Bible heroes is all too obvious in the here and now. It is therefore a time that calls for a different sort of approach to Source of impenetrable strength and perfect beauty. That will be the topic

of next week's sermon. I look forward to connecting with you then.