

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from September 27, 2009

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg
“Voted Off the Island”

Scriptures:
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50



They say a little knowledge is a dangerous thing; nevertheless, this morning, despite my never having actually *viewed* the TV show itself, we’re going to talk about “Survivor”. “Survivor” has gotten so much media attention over the past several years, since its inception on CBS in 2000, that we almost don’t have to watch it to know what’s going on. We’ve seen commercials and trailers and interviews on news shows, and some of us may have heard our friends discussing the show’s developments each season. Not only that, many, many copycat TV reality shows have picked up on the same premise, so if you don’t know “Survivor” specifically, you may know of other TV shows who week after week discard their contestants—dancers, weight losers, models, fashion designers—who are deemed less than the best.

But Survivor is considered the mother of them all. The show maroons a group or groups of strangers, referred to as “tribes”, in a desolate locale each season – many times it’s been a remote island – and there they must provide food, water, fire, shelter for themselves while they engage in various competitions. Now there are twists and turns to the basic premise, but basically, each week, after these competitions, the contestants are called to eliminate one or more in their midst who is dragging them down, keeping them back from progress. This is where we get the expression “voted off the island.” You can’t cut the mustard—pack up and go home. Eventually, there are two survivors remaining and some of these voted-off people will reassemble as a jury and vote for the winner—the Sole Survivor—the winner of the million-dollar prize.

So we watch people motivated by a million dollars and world-wide fame and the spirit of competition and the challenge of survival rising to the occasion and becoming quite clever and innovative in their strategies—AND, at the same time—rather ruthless in their judgment and elimination of others who are getting in their way or holding them back, not doing this survival thing right or very well.

Suppose, just suppose, that the prize was not a million dollars, but the kingdom of heaven, salvation, eternal life in peace with God. “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” (Remember, this statement is from the same “tribe” a few days ago who were arguing about who was the

greatest!)

Jesus responds, “Do not stop him... Whoever is not against us is for us.” And he adds, even the people who do as little as give *you* a drink because *you* bear the name of Christ will not lose the reward.

OK... seems fair, I guess... There are people beyond our little band of disciples who can follow, too, I suppose...I’m not sure they’re doing it exactly right, though. It’s not like they’ve been traveling with us twelve and learning first-hand or anything.

Jesus’ next direction to the disciples takes on a whole new tone. Just a few verses ago he sat down, called the twelve disciples and took a little child and put it among them with the lesson: welcome the lowly, welcome the nobodies and you welcome me. Then we hear, do not stop him...whoever is not against us is for us. But now, his next words suddenly turn harsh: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” And *then* we get some pretty gruesome images of cutting off and gouging out body parts to keep the disciples from stumbling themselves. All for the purpose of entering life and avoiding hell.

In listening to this passage for a word from God for our lives today, we can travel in several directions. We could study the meaning of hell. We could research the use and significance of salt during biblical times. But the one piece that stopped me this week was the question revolving around what Jesus meant when he advised his disciples to cut off the parts that kept them from God, from salvation, from eternal life. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off, your foot, your eye. Better to be without these and enter life, than to hang on to them and miss it altogether or worse. There are several sources that tell us that because of the frequent metaphor in the gospel of the *Body of Christ* to describe all of us as being different parts but belonging to the same body, Jesus was referring to those people who would drag down the movement by putting stumbling blocks in front of others. Others being “the little ones”, interpreted by some as the newest to the faith, by others as the lowly and disenfranchised, described earlier in the chapter as the little child, “the little ones” – don’t stop them, don’t derail them, don’t leave them out.

Or, on the individual level, Jesus is referring to all those things I do that get in the way of my own faith, my own journey towards God and eternal life – through the choices I make with my hands and my feet and my eyes – I’m better off cutting them off than risking the loss of the kingdom of God.

I now have permanent furrows in my forehead from wrestling with these interpretations, and light dawned when I realized we don’t have to accept one to the exclusion of the other – it can be both. We can accept this strong metaphorical admonition from Jesus personally *and* we need to consider it as community.

And this is where “Survivor” comes in, because I’m afraid that the old adage may be true that our television programming reflects the current values of our culture and society. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are in a huge competition with each other for money, for

resources, for our own piece of the earth; and those of us with more education, with more wealth, with better starts in life just by virtue of when and to whom we were born, with more connections—we are indirectly and, yes, maybe unintentionally, voting people off our island all the time.

So, we come to the end of the season on Survivor, with all those weak, less than clever, misguided people finally eliminated, voted off, and the winner stands alone, with all his appendages intact along with both eyes, smiling in triumph with his million-dollar prize. All those who miscalculated, who made mistakes, whose timing was off, who sprained their ankles, or couldn't correctly put up a tent, or start a fire without matches, they have been discarded, eliminated, out of the running...they have been blocked.

But, wait, here comes Christianity, slowly coming over the hill from the other side of the island. Masses of people,

- some limping from the losses they bore through life,
- some struggling under the weight of worries they had about their children,
- some bent over from the burdens they carried of working hard for their families,
- some without limbs because they gave away so much to care for others,
- some with bandages covering the wounds they endured when they spoke up for those with no voices, when they chose *for* the “little ones” instead of for themselves,
- some with bruises and cuts from making the same mistakes over and over again, but continuing to try just the same,
- some with their eyes shut tight because of the horror they've seen,
- some crawling because that's the only way they have left,

... and all of them, all of them, leaning on each other, supporting each other, holding each other up, carrying each other, in their arms, on their shoulders, running back to make sure those who have fallen won't be left behind, moving *together* towards life, towards the kingdom promised to them.

My dear friends in Christ, we have so much to gain from removing the stumbling blocks for others when we recognize them. Not only in matters of equal access to God's abundance on this earth, but in matters of faith, in matters of how we are church together, in matters of how we worship together—children and youth and adults, in our openness to new seekers, in our openness to ours maybe not being the only way, the right way, or the way we've always done it.

Let us ask ourselves: Who are the “little ones” here or out there, in front of whom we've placed stumbling blocks, whose faith and journey towards God may be derailed because we were not more welcoming, more willing to listen to another point of view, to use more inclusive language, to intentionally review our ways of worship and outreach and governance, to focus on the little ones?

“Teacher, we tried to stop him because he was not following us.”

“Do not stop him... Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Let us survive by removing the stumbling blocks, by including rather than excluding, by waiting for instead of leaving behind. Let us survive, not through connivance, but through forgiveness, not on our own, but together. Amen.

