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"Fortress vs. Pasture" The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (09/29/2024, The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Let us pray.

Almighty God made the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable and die, sight, O Lord, our strength, and our Redeemer, amen.

So we have all these rituals here at St. Albans.

We've already been participating in one so much standing and sitting and kneeling and

standing and sitting and, you know, from our usual Sundays we have a holy communion

with bread and wine and there's all this stuff that happens up there, all these rituals,

but there is an unseen ritual that only the core of our people even know about.

And it happens every Sunday after the service has concluded.

It comes about because, as you may know, we live stream our services, which cameras and

there's people even right now, hello, people watching and listening to our services.

And then after that livestream, the services are retained, the recordings are there to

live forever on Facebook and YouTube for those people who couldn't watch it live to join

us later.

And many people do.

But after that, what always happens is we get a notification from Facebook and from YouTube.

And this notification says, I just checked between services.

We've already gotten one from the service this morning.

And it is because the algorithm is always watching and always listening.

And it notes the fact that the songs that we sing at our services are songs it has heard

before.

There is some record company out there, Sony Music, who owns the rights to many recordings

of these works.

Now they don't own the original composition.

And they start Beethoven, they have all been long gone.

They no longer hold the copyright to those compositions.

But the recordings of them, those are copyrighted.

And so we get this notification.
A portion of your livestream has been muted for copyright violations.
And so Eugene Lavori has to approach unbended knee in great humility.
Please, sir.
I can't do the New Zealand accent, so you'll just have to take what
you can get.
Just for the Lord.
We're just a lowly non-profit religious institution.
It was not for profit, it was just a worship service, and then they
released the rights.
And so now you can hear the music unmuted and everything is okay until
it happens again
and again and again.
So the algorithm is always watching.
And I've known a number of people who are like that, like Ross in
Monsters Inc.
I'm always watching.
There are people who are like this.
They're always looking for the bad people in the world and looking to
call them out.
The people out there who are ruining our way of life.
And this has heard on both sides, all sides of the political spectrum.
It's always the other ones that are wrong.
But it happens in local places as well.
The person in your neighborhood with the unkempt lawn, those people
with the wrong signs
in that unkempt lawn, the people out there who may be getting away
with something, you
know, when you see a car parked in the handicap space and someone gets
out and they're walking
fine.
The nerve.
People whose theology needs public correcting.
People whose parenting techniques are lacking, you know, you've
received it when your child
is acting up in the serial aisle and you get the eyebrow.
You're like, would you like a turn?
That's me holding up a child here.
Take the child.
People whose lifestyle choices are offensive, all these things out
there that there are
those who stand and they feel like it is their job to police, to
correct, to call out,
to always be watching.
And that's what we see from the disciples this morning.
We've been reading through the gospel according to St. Mark.
We're in chapter 9 or in the second half of that chapter and you see
that the disciples
come to Jesus and they're all kind of out of breath and outrage to
Jesus.

You'll never believe what happened.
We found someone a rogue exorcist who in your name without permission
is trying to cast
out demons.
This person did not attend the six week training in Orlando.
They don't have the certification.
They're not approved for the exorcism protocols, but don't worry,
Jesus, we put a stop to it.
Jesus's response is striking.
He says in verse 39, don't stop him.
He says anyone who does a deed of power in my name will be, no one who
does such a thing
will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.
Meaning this guy, this rogue exorcist who has not paid the licensing
fee, his subscription
has lapsed.
Nevertheless, this human being is clearly someone who has seen good in
the name of Jesus is
trying to do good in Jesus's name in the world.
Why would you want to stop that?
This human being is a work in progress.
God is clearly up to something in that person's life.
Don't quench it.
Don't put it out.
Let him continue to do his work because he will continue to see the
power of Jesus's
name and be drawn closer to him.
And then in verse 40, he says this unbelievable thing.
He says whoever is not against us is for us.
Usually we say it differently.
We say if you're not with me, you're against me.
Whoever's not with me is against me.
That's a very small circle.
It's only the people who are with me.
Those are the good people.
And everybody else is against me.
He's saying everybody who's not actively against me is in.
It's a much bigger circle.
And let me just note with you and use a very theological word.
Jesus here displays a really unbelievable level of chill, which is
sorely lacking in our
world today.
Nobody is chill.
Everyone is outraged all the time.
Jesus here does not take the bait.
He doesn't join the disciples in their outreach.
Well, I never.
Hopefully you wrote him a ticket and put a stop to that.
Our lawyer will send him a cease and desist letter.
No, he says, look, this person, he's in process.

He's on his way.
Don't stop him.
And he quotes Paul McCartney, let it be.
What a contrast.
If the way many people live and move through the world, which is not,
hey, let it be, it's
I'm watching so I can take you down.
We're like people living in these little fortresses behind these
walls, always looking over the
parapet to see what enemies are advancing so we can strike them down.
We're like, John Cleese playing the French knight and Monty Python on
the Holy Grail.
Go where I will talk to you a second time.
Right?
We're up there watching, trying to strike down our enemies behind
these walls, policing
other people, keeping people out.
Takes a lot of energy to do this.
It's exhausting to be that vigilant all the time, but I will tell you,
I also kind of like
it.
It feels so good to be right all the time.
I don't know if you know this.
Have you experienced it?
I mean, I have.
I am literally behind walls right now.
It's good to feel outraged like you have a monopoly on the truth.
And people that are like this, as I said, it's like living in a
fortress.
But as we know from comic books, fortresses are places of solitude
because you're busy
keeping people out, not letting them in.
Jesus offers a different way, his way of chill.
If you see one kind of person living behind the walls of their own
personal fortress,
Jesus is our good shepherd who's out there in the pasture with the
sheep of his flock.
There are no walls.
He is there guarding, watching, caring for, but he's in a place where
he can continually
invite more sheep into the fold.
He's open-hearted and open-handed and inviting.
So for us, neurotic, control freak, living behind our walls, people,
how do we get from
our fortress to the pasture?
Out there with the good shepherd.
There's a vision, a picture of this in the book of James.
It's a book we've been reading through as well the last few months.
In chapter 5, St. James writes and describes a picture of what the
church, the community

in the pasture should look like.

He says it's a place where if there are people who are suffering, they tell others and invite them to help.

If there are people who are sick, they invite the pastors to come and pray for them and anoint them with oil.

If they are sinning, they confess it not just to God but to each other to receive not judgment but forgiveness.

If they are joyful, they should sing out together.

If this beautiful community that James presents, it's a community where people are not living behind these walls and defenses, but they are vulnerable and open about when they need

help and they find that community in that place.

It sounds a little bit when you read James, it sounds like a 12-step meeting, which we

have five per week here at St. Albans and if you've ever been in a one, you know it's

the kind of place where when you open your deep grief, people respond to not with indignation

horror, shock and rage, but with love and grace and acceptance.

So how do we make that move?

I mean, assuming you want to, maybe you want to stay in your fortress, Jesus might come

knocking someday, but if you'd like to make a move, I mean that's the thing, how do we

get from one to the other, how do we get from the exhausting defensiveness and outrage

all the time, the cortisol levels through the roof, blood pressure is high, stress is constant,

sleep is in and out, how do we move from that place to the pasture with the good shepherd?

Well, it comes from this sort of hair-raising, industrial strength teaching from Jesus

and the other part of Mark 9, that was the part where you woke up during the reading.

You know, you were sort of like nodding off and then you heard, cut off the hands, cut

off the feet, pluck out the eyes and you're like, what?

And Jesus is like, and hell, hell, hell, you're like, what?

I thought I was in the Episcopal Church.

The cool ones.

What is going on here about plucking out eyes and cutting off feet?

Well, to me, this invites us to a theological aha moment, which if you have this aha moment,

I think it is at least one piece of this journey of moving from the fortress to the pasture.

Jesus says, if your hand causes you to sin, get out the machete.

If your foot causes you to sin, go out to the chopping block and hand your friend the axe.

If your eye causes, pluck it out.

Now I have to say, never in the history of the Christian church, not in Jesus' day,

because the disciples didn't really go out and do this, nor in the history of the Christian

church have people taken this as a literal time to go get out the saw, kind of passage.

That has never happened.

Or the pedics, they do it, Christians do not.

There's always been understanding that Jesus here is using extreme, even violent, exaggerated

language to get people to wake up, just like you did today, and he's trying to teach

us something.

Because you could begin to implement what he's calling you to do, you could have a little

thought experiment.

Okay, my hand causes me to sin.

I cut it off.

Okay, now I find my foot causing me to sin.

I keep walking to places.

I shouldn't go.

Let's cut those off.

Okay, now I'm good.

Oh, wait.

I'm looking at things I shouldn't look at.

Let's pluck out my eyes.

Okay, now I'm a handless, footless, eyeless, sinless person.

Oh, wait.

I keep thinking, envious, bitter, greedy, fearful, loathing, jealous, self-absorbed thoughts.

I'm full of anger and malice and rage and doubt.

Oh, no.

What do I cut off now?

Jesus is trying to get people to the place where they realize what he's already said to

chapters back, chapter 7, verse 21.

Jesus said, it is from within, from the human heart, come all these evil intentions.

You could cut off all your limbs and you would still find yourself to be a human with things

inside you.

You can't control as much as you would like to.

Jesus is trying to show people that it's not just the hand of the foot of the eye that

has to go.

The whole thing is in need of major renovation from top to bottom.

He's trying to get us to realize the whole thing has to go.

And when he gets us to that point, he doesn't abandon us and say,
well, hope you can work
that out.
Hope you can figure out a way to let the whole thing go.
He himself then goes to the cross, where he gives all of himself,
hands, feet, eyes,
his whole self.
He gives it up for people who can't do it themselves.
And this is when I think you begin to have that theological aha
moment, oh, Jesus isn't
just trying to give me some recipe for trying to be a better person
and get my behavior
under control.
And Jesus is saying, I got a real thing inside that needs some work.
And I can't do it myself.
And so I need a savior.
Well, it just so happens, I know a guy.
And when you begin to get to that place, where you're open to seeing
this one who's already
seeing you all along and has given everything for you, when he's
brought you to that place
of honesty and also his great love for you in that place, that is the
place where we
begin to move out of the fortress and into the pasture.
Because we no longer need that protection of our so-called illusion of
perfection, we
now can go out to be sheep who are in need of a shepherd, a good
shepherd in the pasture.
You know who Moracy is?
He's a very self-righteous, thank you, Christ the Squires.
He had a phase of listening to the Smith a lot, apparently.
The Smiths in English band, I commend them to you, and then Moracy had
a solo career.
There's two people in here who know what I'm talking about.
But Moracy has a great line, I'm human, and I need to be loved.
And if you've gotten to this place with Jesus, we've heard what he's
trying to tell you
about yourself, despite your denial.
You may be in a place where you realize you're human and you need to
be loved, and you're
not going to get loved in that fortress, you need to come out.
And that's what this begins to do.
So as we now land at the plain, do it.
Oh wait, right, just do it, come on Jeff, get out of your fortress.
Come on Don, get out of your fortress, right?
I'm telling you to do it, so just do it.
Well here's the thing, Jesus also knows that it doesn't work quite
that easily as much
as we wish it did.
Jesus gives us this place, the place that I talked about earlier that

James described,
the church, this place of people where we can sing our songs of
praise, share our laments,
we can confess our sins and find grace and time of need, we can bring
our broken places
and find balm in Gilead, oil for anointing, people that embrace us.
Because we need to do this fortress to pass your thing all the time,
because we run back
to those walls, they think we think they're safe and we'll protect us.
We find it again and again that they won't.
And the great news about Jesus is that he always brings us back,
always opens his arms
to us as we return Sunday after Sunday as we confess our sins, as we
pray for each other,
as we sing these songs here together.
And once again, that theological aha moment, we realized we are not
good people called
to get better.
We are people who are deeply in need and who find in Christ a Savior
who always welcomes
us back to the pasture.
Let us pray.
Dear God, help us to leave our fortresses and come find you in the
open places where we
are embraced and where we can find rest.
We pray in Christ's name, amen.