

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Y32
17 Pentecost (Proper 19B) 8:30 a.m., 11 a.m. and 6 p.m.
Sunday 16 September 2018 Congregation Sunday

Proverbs 1:20-33
Psalm 19
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

The Tongue Is a Fire: The Truth of Grace

"How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire" (James 3).

1. Nothing is older or newer than grace. There was never a time before grace existed and yet, if we pay attention, grace will surprise us every day.

The Buddha warns his disciples that grasping his teaching can be like picking up a poisonous snake in the wilderness. Even well-meaning students may take hold of his words and draw the wrong conclusions. Furthermore they can be off not just by a little, but interpret them to mean the exact opposite of what he intended.¹

The events in today's gospel occur at a decisive moment in the center of the book and at a crossroads. Jesus and the disciples travel first through mostly Jewish territory and then through the Gentile lands on their way to Jerusalem. As hearers of this story we know who Jesus is, that at his baptism God called Jesus his beloved son. We watch the disciples learn this for themselves.

As they walk Jesus asks them "Who do people say I am?" And they respond, "John the Baptist... Elijah... one of the prophets" (Mk. 8). When he says, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers perfectly and calls him the Christ or the Anointed One. Jesus asks them to keep silent about this and goes on plainly to explain what this will mean. The Son of Man will suffer, be rejected by the chief priests and killed.

But Peter has been bitten by the proverbial Buddhist snake. He heard the teaching and knows the right words but interprets them in the opposite way. He rebukes Jesus and tries to convince him to turn aside from accepting suffering at the hands of the authorities. You might think that Jesus may be over exaggerating when he says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan."

But picture the scene. Jesus and his friends are walking the road toward Caesarea Philippi and the temple that Herod the Great constructed which Philip II dedicated it to Augustus (63 BC – 44AD) the first Roman Emperor. The Emperor's title is "Divi Filius" or "Son of the Divine."² The Gospels contrast Jesus and the emperor.

At the heart of Jesus' teaching is an entirely new picture of what the word "Messiah" means. Jesus is not merely a stronger version of the dictators that we are all familiar with. He does not defeat bullying, abuse, and terror with more of the same. He does not simply replace the current king with a more powerful version. Instead Jesus subverts the whole idea that we should dedicate our lives to gaining power by manipulating and terrorizing over others.

He outlines the paradox of our existence as complex primates when he says that we will not thrive unless we deny ourselves, unless we live for something great even if it means taking up our cross. "For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Mk. 8).

2. The other night I asked my family for examples of people we knew who had gained the world but in the process lost their lives. In the San Francisco of 2018 this is a common occurrence. Our friends, neighbors, even we ourselves have so much and yet somehow it isn't enough.

Robert Sapolsky writes about the biology of pleasure in his book *Behave*. He points out that the more often our bodies are exposed to a positive stimulus, the less we experience satisfaction from it. Biologists call this habituation and it is the phenomena that, "nothing is ever as good as that first time."

This is made more complicated because modern people have invented "pleasures far more intense than anything offered by the natural world." This is true of food, sex, comfort, novel experiences, arresting images, vivid music, etc. He writes, "Once, we had lives that, amid considerable privation, also offered numerous subtle, hard-won pleasures. And now we have drugs that cause spasms of pleasure and dopamine release a thousandfold higher than anything stimulated in our old drug-free world."

As a result Sapolsky claims that we experience a kind of emptiness arising out of, "this combination of over-the-top non-natural sources of reward and the inevitability of habituation." Now we "barely notice the fleeting whisper of pleasure caused by leaves in autumn or the lingering glance of the right person... our frequent human tragedy is that the more we consume, the hungrier we get."³

And so I guess there is a biological sense in which, "whoever would save his life will lose it." One can also come at this from a social perspective too. The Process Theologian Bernard Loomer (1912-1985) writes about two kinds of power.⁴

First there is what he calls unilateral power. This is all too familiar in the rhetoric of our time. It builds walls, makes threats, and deploys overwhelming force to intimidate and demean. It is a sneering "us versus them" picture of the world, which forces others to submit rather than making decisions in consultation with them. This is the way of Caesar, or the Emperor.

Loomer contrasts this with relational power. This involves working cooperatively through inclusion, empathy and listening. It means learning from people who differ from us. Relational power respects the interests and experiences of others in the way that good couples and parents do. This is the way of Jesus who sees the blessedness in the meek and the extraordinary value of peacemakers as children of God (Mk. 5).

3. Last night the Hawaiian activist Nainoa Thompson told some stories that give me a picture of what it looks like to lose your life and end up saving it. When my wife's grandmother was a child it became illegal to speak the Hawaiian language in school. By law teachers had the right to beat Hawaiian children for simply communicating with each other. The flourishing Hawaiian culture of the nineteenth century with its high rates of literacy and large number of Hawaiian language newspapers was devastatingly suppressed.

Nainoa Thompson said that as a result of this, "Hawaiians were conditioned to fail. The pain of failure felt so severe that it meant that you just never tried as a result."⁵

You might remember Thor Heyerdahl's book *Kon-Tiki: Across the Pacific on a Raft* (1950). Heyerdahl built and sailed a raft to test his hypothesis that the Polynesian Islands were settled by people who basically just floated there from the Americas.⁶ Remarkably no one in those days seemed able to believe that the ancient Hawaiians were capable of getting there themselves. In fact they were the greatest navigators in human history and had the technology to sail against prevailing winds and currents.

So in 1973 the Polynesian Voyaging Society was established to try to recover the art and technology of long-distance canoe travel along with the culture that had been lost.⁷ They built the Hōkūle'a and with the help of a Micronesian teacher they sailed to Tahiti and back. I saw the picture of the Hōkūle'a's arrival in Papeete. It seemed as if half the population greeted them on the beach. The Hawaiians realized that this was more than just a Hawaiian project.

On the second voyage a huge storm with stacked waves flipped the canoe. It could not be righted. In the thunderous gale the thirteen person crew was sitting on the top of one hull periodically getting tossed into the sea and somehow managing to crawl back

up again. Eddie Aikau the heroic lifeguard who made 600 rescues at Waimea Bay set off on his surfboard to get help.

Nainoa Thompson swam out to talk to Eddie and was the last person to see or touch him before he paddled over mountains of water. The rest of the crew was miraculously rescued by helicopter in the middle of the night. With tears in his eyes Thompson describes the terrible sorrow that he saw in Eddie's mother when they arrived at the airport.

Eddie gave his life that day for the sake of the Hōkūle'a and its crew. But since then Nainoa Thompson also has given his life for this project too. Through his father's inspiration the demoralized voyagers decided to not give up. In 2013 the ship circumnavigated the world. Hawaiians have a new sense of pride in their heritage as wayfinders and navigators. But his mission is not just about Hawaiians. He has dedicated his whole life to also helping us to take better care of the vast Pacific Ocean and the whole earth. The sister vessel Hikianalia arrives today. You can see it at Aquatic Park.

St. Augustine talks about a life that is "incurvatus se" or curved in on itself. Instead of living like a tightly closed fist Jesus invites us to open ourselves. Today at Grace Cathedral we celebrate 169 years of just this kind of openness as a congregation. The first rector John Leonard ver Mehr (1809-1886) arrived in 1849. He worried about whether the congregation understood his preaching But most of all he cared for everyone who crossed his path not just Episcopalians. He ministered to sailors who had been convicted of mutiny and were about to be hanged on their ship. He founded schools because he cared so much about children

From that first Sunday when miners slipped an envelope of gold dust into the church collection plate to today we have been gathered as a people losing our lives with each other, for each other and for the world. We have boldly courageous heroes like Eddie Aikau and humble ones who set the world on fire with their stories like Nainoa Thompson. In this world of people who are unable to really feel because they have been saturated and numbed by pleasure we find new life in Jesus. We call it grace. God's grace is the ship that carries us. God's grace always surprises us.

#RobertSapolsky, #EddieAikau,

¹ The Buddhist story and more coms from, Liz and Matt Boulton, "Crossroads: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for the Seventeenth Week after Pentecost," SALT, 11 September 2018.

<http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/9/11/crossroads-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-seventeenth-week-after-pentecost>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesarea_Philippi

³ Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (NY: Penguin, 2017) 69.

⁴ Bruce G. Epperly, "Jesus' Lesson in Large Hearted Theology," *The Christian Century*, 14 August 2018.

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/september-16-ordinary-24b-mark-827-38>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_Loomer

⁵ Nainoa Thompson, "An Afternoon with Wayfinder and Master Navigator Nainoa Thompson," lecture at Capachino High School, San Bruno, California, 15 September 2018.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kon-Tiki_expedition

⁷ <http://www.hokulea.com/vision-mission/>