Sermon for The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, September 9, 2018
Text: Mark 7:24-37
Title: And I mean to be one, too

My mom moved to Albuquerque in the summer of 2014. She found a nice apartment not too far from the hospital where she’d be working as a nurse and set about exploring her new city. She went hunting for a new favorite coffee shop, the best grocery stores, a good yoga class, and a smattering of nice parks. Perhaps most daunting of all, as many people here can attest, was Church shopping. It took her longer than she would have liked to find a place where she could put down roots, so when, months later, she finally called to say she’d be joining St. Chad’s Episcopal Church, it was a long time coming.

The first thing I said was how happy I was that she had found a spiritual home. The second thing I said was, “who in the world is St. Chad? Like, is he a real saint?” Which set her off in peals of laughter as she exclaimed, “Well, golly, Claire, you’re the priest in the family. I was hoping you could tell me!” With her still on the phone, I turned to that repository of all sacred knowledge, Wikipedia, where I learned that St. Chad is indeed a real saint - a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon abbot and Bishop to boot! (And yes, I did, later, verify this information by referencing some slightly more authoritative resources.) Like many people from the early Christian communities in what we’d now call Great Britain, pretty much everything we know about Chad comes from the Venerable Saint Bede, whose Ecclesiastical History of the English People, written around 731, sought to offer a robust, though not unbiased, history of his people.

Chad’s life does not read as particularly remarkable. He was one of four brothers, all active in the Church, who became a monk, and eventually a student of St. Aiden’s at the famed monastery, Lindisfarne. Chad lived in the tumultuous decades after St. Augustine landed in Canterbury, bringing Roman Christendom to the existing Celtic Church, and while Bede highlights his commitment to Roman authority, it’s clear that he was a somewhat controversial figure. Renowned for his steadiness and his studiousness, he was appointed Bishop of York, but his Episcopacy was short-lived (if you refer to his Wikipedia page, header 5.3 reads “the elevation of Chad” and 5.4 “the removal of Chad.”) When all is said and done, Chad’s is a rather
ambiguous legacy, not only because we have but the slimmest glimpse into his life, but because he was, himself, complex. Contradictory. Inconsistent.

When I was younger, I thought being a saint meant being perfect, and that being perfect meant being unfailingly good, kind, and courageous, which made saints seem, well, kind of inhuman. After all, it is hard enough to be occasionally good, kind and courageous, and near impossible to be unfailingly anything. So it surprised me, as I learned more about Christian history, to realize that our saints, like us, come in all shapes and sizes; have all kinds of personalities and personal histories; varied gifts and callings, strengths and weaknesses. That they struggled, they sinned, they suffered, and they kept striving.

Over time, this helped me to see that becoming a saint does mean being perfected, but that my definition of “perfection” was off. If we believe that Jesus was, in the wholeness of his person, a full revelation of God’s own self, then we can look to him for our definition of perfection. Indeed, this is traditionally the measure of sainthood: how much like Jesus, how Christ-like, is this person and was their life? Only, when we do that, when we turn to Jesus, we do not find someone who was free from fear and feeling and failure, a stranger of bias or burdens or betrayal, someone who never doubted, never got mad, never got impatient. Jesus felt all these feelings! Experienced all these things! Instead, we someone who was fully himself – fully God and fully man. Not inhuman but fully human, which might be a more helpful and holy definition of perfection for us as well.

This morning’s Gospel passage speaks to this paradox perfectly. Here we have Jesus, who has just been challenging the limited and limiting legalism of the Pharisees, talking about how it is what comes from our heart that defiles, when he is confronted with a Gentile woman of Syrophoenician origin. She is someone outside the social order: an “other,” an alien, undocumented, unwanted. And Jesus – well, he was just arguing that the conventional lines of in and out, the norms that defined the identity of Judaism at the time, were too constraining, too small. He has been constantly pushing those boundaries, trying to help those around him see the humanity and grace and dignity of everyone, regardless of where they come from or what labels society has laid upon them.

But then he is confronted with someone who actually doesn’t belong to his in-group. Who, in the flesh, challenges the assumptions he was born into, which he might on one level be able to critique but nevertheless live in his bones (like an abolitionist who might have had
misgivings about his daughter marrying a former slave; or someone today who speaks eloquently against mass incarceration but hesitates to give someone with a felony record a job). And Jesus’ first response – unconscious? conditioned? - is to push her away. To deny her plea for help. He is unkind, calling her a dog. He is unhelpful, ignoring her plight. He is without pity. But she persists, saying, fine, maybe I am nothing, maybe I am just an animal, maybe I don’t have the right color skin or the right papers or the right accent, maybe I don’t have the right degree or the right clothes or know on which side of the plate to put a fork, but are not even animals deserving of the leftover crumbs, the leftover grace, the leftover love, which falls from your table? Am I not alive? She is saying. Am I not something? Do you not see me?

And in that moment, something clicks for Jesus. He sees the error of his ways. His shortsighted small-mindedness. His tribalism. His lack of imagination. And instead of getting defensive, trying to justify his comment or make an excuse for it, as we might expect from people today, he changes course. “For saying that” – this hard to hear but true thing, these words that show me something in myself I didn’t want but needed to see – “For saying that, you may go.” And with that, he heals her daughter. She is free of her demons, just as Jesus is free of his. And then Jesus goes on to continue healing, opening the ears of the deaf, healing the tongue of one who cannot speak. Liberating others, as he himself has been liberated, and continues to be liberated.

This story is one of the most illuminating in the Gospels when it comes to the life of Jesus, because it shows us that even he made mistakes, even he had to keep learning and growing and challenging his assumptions and choosing a life of goodness, kindness, and courage, which means that we, his disciples, should not expect to arrive someday at a state of rarefied holiness so much as we should expect to do more of the same. Which means that when we make mistakes we are not unfaithful or dumb. We have stumbled upon an opportunity to learn. That when we are unkind we are not bad. We have encountered an opportunity to change. That when we fall short of our ideals we are not irredeemable. Instead, we are practicing our humanity, and we can keep going and growing.

When we look to Jesus for an example of perfection, what we find is someone who became precisely who he was made to be. And if we take that to be our end, our hope – not some unattainable, inhuman excellence but a living, learning, loving example of living faithfully – then the saints will not seem so far off, so inaccessible, so unreachable. And that will be our joy and
our challenge, because inhumanely good saints let us off the hook. They are so good that they don’t unsettle us in our messy lives, do not call to us or compel us in our own beautiful struggles.

When Paul wrote letters to the earliest Christian communities, he didn’t address them, “To the people of Corinth,” “To the faithful in Rome,” “To whom it may concern in Ephesus.” No. He wrote to troublesome, troubling groups, whom he loved dearly, whom God loved dearly, and he addressed those letters “to the saints” in Corinth, in Rome, in Ephesus, and beyond. Because sainthood is not just for the exceptionally good, kind and courageous, but also the unexceptionally good, kind, and courageous – people like Chad, and Aiden and Bede, people like you and me, people willing, like Jesus, to fall and to fail in the pursuit and practice of love.

As we head into another program year together, another autumn, another cycling of the seasons, I’d like to hold out this ideal for us: the challenge and the invitation of becoming ourselves more Christ-like. More willing to listen to people we’re used to writing off. More willing to have our hearts turned and our minds changed. More willing to attend to the suffering of the world. More willing to be free, and to risk helping to free one another, not only in moments that seem ripe with triumph and transformation but as we set up for coffee hour, practice anthems, prepare the altar; dance at Oktoberfest, build bikes, package food; as we welcome people for concerts, share our campus with Ventana, Boy Scouts, and other groups; as we learn and listen to comforting and discomforting truths.

This doesn’t mean, as we strive to live into our own sainthood, that we won’t make mistakes. We will. It doesn’t mean that we won’t need to be converted to the humanity of our neighbors over and over again. Look at Bishop Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jesus himself! And it doesn’t mean we will always feel good or peaceful or happy or connected. Mother Theresa spent much of her life feeling as though God had abandoned her, and many saints have struggled with doubt and depression. What is means instead is that we do not strive in vain. That our struggles are not evidence of our being unloved or unworthy or underprepared. They are, instead, evidence of our being on the way, and if we are on the way, well, we are in very good company. The company of one another. The company of saints and martyrs, of angels and archangels. Of God’s own son. The company of those who will challenge and change us, love and liberate us, perturb and perfect us, until, at last, we too become the people we were created to be. Let it be so. Amen.