

“Hey, kid: have a scorpion!”

a sermon for The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 12, Year C, 24 July 2022

Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19) and Luke 11:1-13

for St. Paul & the Redeemer Episcopal Church, Chicago, Illinois

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“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?”

I’m calling this sermon, “Hey, kid: have a scorpion!” You know, even Marie-Antoinette wasn’t accused apocryphally of suggesting scorpion snacks for the esurient; only hawking hardtack to the hungry lost her her head.

There’s a sense of persistence lacking in the New Revised Standard Version Revised English Bible translation we heard, that the *Revised English Bible* translation better conveys:

I say to you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his friend’s shameless persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. And I say to you, keep asking, and it will be given to you; keep seeking, and you will find; keep knocking, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who keeps asking receives, and the one who keeps seeking finds, and to the one who keeps knocking it will be opened.”

In my reflections this week, I’ve concluded that this is not just a plea for food for the hungry, but a metaphor for all the ways in which God’s children ask for what they need.

At the Episcopal Church’s General Convention in Baltimore a couple weeks ago, we heard a lot of people asking for a metaphorical fish or an egg.

American Indians keep calling out for justice and healing for the theft of their lands, their resources, and... their children, thousands of whom were forcibly taken by the United States Government and sent far from their homes to American Indian Residential Schools to be stripped of their language, culture, customs, dignity, their names, and in too many cases, their lives. One elderly woman spoke as a survivor of one such school. The Episcopal Church ran some of those schools on behalf of the Government, and decades later, native peoples keep asking for what they need: healing, closure, reparations, apologies... the bodies of their dead children.

African Americans keep asking and fighting for a national reckoning with their ongoing generations of poisoning by the scorpion sting of slavery and racism.

LGBTQIA+ people keep fighting for equal dignity and inclusion within the church, and safety in intolerant communities.

And so it goes with countless groups who do not match the norms of our white supremacist society. One says, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread...”, and the other responds, “Do not bother me...I cannot get up and give you anything.”

Today I tell you it is not just neighbors in need of bread who keep asking for what they need. It is not just oppressed minorities who keep knocking on the closed door. Jesus’ parable of the persistent neighbor calls us to respond to the needs of everyone who lacks; he calls us to consider the impact of our actions and inactions on everyone around us—next door and on the other side of the world.

Dear ones, we at SPR are a compassionate community. A welcoming community. A generous community. A giving community. But we, like our neighbors, are also by degrees, unhearing, rapacious, ignorant; big business and other meta-forces want us that way; they subvert our good nature for their profit and power. And the impact of our selfishness, by way of “things done and left undone”, is killing our neighbors.

In our gospel reading two weeks ago, a lawyer tested Jesus, asking,

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’

In the parable of the quote-unquote “Good Samaritan” that follows, Jesus identifies the stranger as the man’s neighbor.

In Jesus' time, those who lived just a few miles away were strangers. The magi who visited the infant Jesus in Bethlehem were practically the modern equivalent of aliens from another planet. But today, as our closing hymn proclaims, "strangers now are friends". We have friends and family scattered around the globe, including people we've never met in person. We have parishioners who grew up on other continents, and still have family and friends in those places, and our actions and inactions, our active and passive choices, impact them and the billions of other distant neighbors who are unknown to us.

Our Associate Rector, Barnabas; Padma, our Director of Children's Ministries; and their daughter are in India this month, visiting their families for the first time in five years. India has endured some of the most extreme, life-threatening heat ever experienced in modern times, and we know (though many people still deny) that our exploitation of earth's natural resources has led to carbon pollution and global warming, driving extreme weather and climate change around the globe, even if we have never left the community in which we were born. India did not cause these heat waves; Americans have done more than anyone else to cause these catastrophes. Europeans, too, are contending with life-threatening weather extremes—flooding, heat waves—despite a lower per capita carbon footprint than ours, and more aggressive strategies to get carbon pollution under control.

And can you believe it? A majority of our national-level politicians still refuse to act.

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People around the world are dying from extreme heat and flooding, from historic avalanches as ancient mountain glaciers disintegrate; they are displaced from their ancestral homes by the flooding of their communities or the disruption of their foodways. They face thirst as their water supplies are depleted or poisoned by greedy and corrupt officials and executives. They cry out for an egg, and receive a scorpion.

When, you ask, did we give them a scorpion? In Matthew chapter 25, beginning at verse 41, Jesus says, "Then [the king] will say to those at his left hand, '...I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'" We hand out scorpions when we do not hold our government officials, corporations, and even the leaders of our local institutions accountable to standards and practices that preserve the lives of all our neighbors—those next door and those on low-lying islands in the Pacific, who watch the waves lap a little higher on their shores every decade. The refusal of 51 out of 100 U.S. Senators to act on climate change mitigation is like handing a snake to the child who asked for a fish. Chicago gives the egg-seeking child a scorpion with its abysmal 8% recycling rate. And even SPR's unchecked use of disposables at coffee hour, and perhaps not installing solar panels on the sunny, south-facing roof over our heads are ways in which we, through action or inaction, ignore the pleas of those most impacted by climate change. "Hey, kid: have a scorpion!"

The New York *Times* said this week, "Monarch Butterflies Are Endangered, Leading Wildlife Monitor Says...[citing] climate change and habitat loss." Who are our neighbors? My brothers and sisters in Christ, the monarchs are our neighbors, as are all God's creatures. We may delight in them. Use them. Live beside them. Fear them. Eat them. No matter our relationship, we depend upon them. For our survival. We are all interdependent. Yet our collective and individual actions and inactions are driving many of our neighbors toward extinction. We may not hear cries of distress, but when the swirling cloud of passenger pigeons once darkened the skies, and barely registered some years later; or when American bison herds who once thundered across the plains were reduced to so few a number that they would have fit into a livestock truck, they tell us in their own way that they need a proverbial fish, or an egg. They need our help.

My friend, you are a compassionate, caring, generous, loving person already, as am I. I implore you: hear the voices of those who keep asking for what they need to survive; see the signs of those who keep seeking what they need to thrive; answer the knocking on the door. Let us commit to tend "this fragile earth, our island home." Let us restore God's creation for the joy and nourishment and fulfillment of all whom God has made.