

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name,
and we tried to stop him,
because he was not following us.”

What is it about us that we have such a desire to be in control?

In some ways it is comforting to know that we are not alone in our mistakes,
that even the disciples made the same mistakes that we do.

And even more comforting, that it didn't make Jesus stop loving them,
didn't make him abandon them,

though as you heard, it did get under his skin quite a bit.

One might even say Jesus flew off the handle.

I mean really,

the Prince of Peace railing on about chopping off hands and feet,
or plucking out eyes.

What do you think is it about this situation that got Jesus so unhinged?

Among other things,

Jesus has been trying to teach his disciples a new way of leading;
the way of servant leadership.

As they fall back into their old habits of wanting to be in control,

and thinking they're somehow better because they follow Jesus,

I think Jesus wants to get their attention

in an effort to nip their backsliding in the bud.

You have to admit that his diatribe does get their attention;
at least it got my attention.

It was difficult for them to learn this new way of leading,

just as it is difficult for us to learn this new way of leading.

Servant leadership is a way of leading

that focuses not on the leader, but on the led.
This focus, however is hard to maintain
because our normal way of doing business
is to try and take care of ourselves first.
And the devil does a good job
of making sure that anything that tries to change that way of doing business
gets seen as a threat.
Have you ever been the leader of some undertaking,
working with a group of people
and you have an idea about how to solve the problem before you.
Then someone else in the group comes up with a great idea,
better than yours,
and that little voice in the back of your head
tries to get you to ignore or dismiss it.
And even when you do what is right and ignore that little voice
and accept the idea,
when your group does a good job
and the boss praises your work,
the little voice returns
and coaches you to take the credit
and not worry about giving the credit
to whom it is rightfully due.
It is a constant battle.
All the great gifts that God gives to us,
of free will and creative energy;
All come with a risk.
For some it is a great risk.
As we get in touch with our own great sense of gifted-ness,
it is far too easy for us to fall prey

to a sense that we are in some way better than those other people,
whoever those other people might be.

And worse yet,

we can come to believe that those other people
are somehow less worthy than we are.

If this were the limit of our arrogance it would be bad enough,

but far too often we take an even bigger misstep,
presuming to know what God should do in any given situation.

It is difficult for us not to try and take the lead,

to think that we, more than God, would know what is best for us.

To presume on God's good grace.

That is the danger Jesus is railing against to his disciples.

And that danger has not been lessened

by two thousand years of history.

There are countless examples scattered through history,
both personal and corporate,
of where we have succumbed to that danger
in the intervening years.

It is not easy being made in the image of God.

It is a great responsibility.

We all too often get confused,
mixing up what is image and what is God.

We mistakenly attribute our own limits to those of God,

limiting our vision of God's ability to work in our lives.

Or we mistakenly attribute God's power to our own actions,

usurping God's abundant grace for our own aggrandizement.

In either case we fall short of God's image of us

in spite of all that God does,

and the kingdom of God gets a little farther away.

It is no wonder that God gets a little testy at times.
I believe that is the real reason why Jesus loses his temper
when his disciples try to stop someone from casting out demons.
“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.”

Sculptors have humorously described the art of sculpting
as starting off with a block of stone
and chipping away everything
that doesn't look like the object they are sculpting.

In much the same way, I think,
this is the advice that Christ gives to his disciples -
anything in your life that is not in the image of God must be cut away.

At least four times a year, as a community, we renew our baptismal covenant.
A covenant is a lived agreement
that gives shape to a relationship.

Our baptismal covenant gives shape to our relationship with God.

In this covenant, in a very real way,
we agree to place ourselves into the hands of God.
We submit ourselves to the hands of the great sculptor,
inviting God to cut away
all that is not in the image that God has for us.

But it is more than submission,
for we agree to be active members in the process.

We are the living stones
and we too work to sculpt ourselves with God's help.

It is a process that will last all of our lives,

as living stones don't always grow in the way God intends.
In this process of growth and sculpting
we catch glimpses of God's will and wisdom
in the pieces that get cut away,
and the pieces that get left behind.
It is never easy to submit to the hammer and chisel of God;
Harder still to wield the hammer when God places the chisel.
It is hard.

It can be painful.

But it is necessary.

The kingdom of God is a wonderful place,
but it is not for all of us.

Not because we are not worthy,
but because we are not done.

We must be servants to lead those who will follow.

And we must be prepared;

We must be fashioned.

As our prayer was of old,
so it continues to this day
and for all the years to come:

Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;
let them not get dominion over me;
then shall I be whole and sound,
and innocent of a great offense.

Amen.