

Lord of Flies, Lord of Life (25June17)

Matthew 10:24-39;

Romans 6:1b-11

Having returned from the Boundary Waters, I can quickly admit we are not always at our most presentable. After a week of not showering, scraggly facial hair and using my only comb once, bug bites all over and mud smears on my clothes, that's not how I generally (for example) try to show up on Sunday mornings.

But from that wild unkempt sense, I also want to start with "Lord of the Flies," especially since the name "Beelzebul" in our Gospel reading gets converted to mean "Lord of the Flies." (It sometimes is also referenced as "Master of Dung.")

Anyway, I toyed with the notion of bringing "Lord of the Flies" along to read to my Boundary Waters group, but I decided that a story about a group of young people off in the wilderness who turned to the worst possible outcomes of being murderous maybe wasn't the most sensible reading choice.

Yet now, returned from the wilderness, I'm nevertheless confronted by the same situation in this difficult Gospel reading, as it's not only about the least presentable Bible reading we'd like to have, but it seems to embody some of our worst tendencies or outcomes. Maybe that it makes us uncomfortable is a good sign, at least.

So for those who don't know the story, "The Lord of the Flies" is a book about a group of boys stranded on an island. They begin organizing themselves with systems to establish order—for who takes care of shelter and fire and food and cooperating on decisions. But they then veer toward laziness and fear and brutal aggression. We might tend to label the boys' decline as returning to primal instincts from civilized behavior. We're apt to describe society as good and the wild as bad. We also get diverted to believe our flesh and bodies

and daily existence in this world are sinful and that we're trying to escape to a more religious and spiritual and heavenly existence. But we can't quite agree with those labels. The boys in the book had been scared of a beast, but it isn't separate from them or part of nature. The island isn't to blame; we get the much more terrifying insight that the Lord of the Flies is inescapably among and within them, dehumanizing themselves.

Against that, let's consider what it means to be truly human, to be seen as good creatures of God, made in the image of God, to live with the life God intends for us. That is really what's at stake here in the diabolical confrontation of what controls our lives.

To understand that, we can start to dive into this hard Gospel reading with one of the most important biblical distinctions for what it means to be human. Brace yourselves, because this may be uncomfortable. If you have a sense that someplace inside of you is a soul, that there's a divine little spark, waiting to rejoin God even though the rest of you will decompose (and has already begun to decompose and rot and wear out as you age), if you think that flesh is corrupt, but there's an ideal truer inner self, then you are not on track for how the Bible sees your humanity. In the Bible, there is no separate soul. Your soul does not go to heaven. You don't have an invisible spirit that flies away when you die. That isn't how the Bible talks about this. That is Greek philosophy. That is Plato and is a perversion of the Bible's sense of God's good creation.

That's why it's so important to understand, because that dualism incorrectly labels life here as bad, as ungodly. That directly contradicts God who says this is good, who says this is so good and loved this world so much that God wanted to be part of it, to come and share our existence, to be incarnate in Jesus. This is also

why we talk about the resurrection of the body, because you're all you. There isn't a piece that can be separated out. If something of you will exist after death, it needs to be—and God wants it to be—the whole you.

Now, if you're not only uncomfortable with that but are also the argumentative type, you may point out that the Gospel reading mentions your "soul," as "fear the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell."

Well, that shows an infected translation. The original word there is "*psyche*." It's a word we know as part of "psychology" (which we obviously don't define as the study of souls). It may be helpful to know that *psyche* is also in the last verse translated as "life," ("those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it"). Life is a better sense of what *psyche* means in the Bible. It's about truly living, about the life God intends, about being who and how we're meant to be.

One example* I read this week illustrated it by saying that the loss of life during World War 2 isn't only measured by the body count of soldiers, but also by Germans following Hitler and being corrupted by Nazi ideals in a way that truly defaced humanity, chasing after power and seeking to exterminate their siblings instead of loving and helping them in their time of need. (We do use the term "soul" in this sense, too, for when a nation is so misguided it has collectively "lost its soul.") And in that sort of instance, we could pretty readily say that that's not the sort of life that God intends. In a very honest way, life was being destroyed, thrown out to trash heap of burning refuse.

World War 2 was also a stark instance of the division that these tensions create. For Jesus' notion of bringing a sword to strike against those who would abandon the goodness

of life, some might take even so much as the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in that light. That may be too stark, though, as I'd wonder about the cure being as bad as the disease. Still, it leads us to the sense of divisiveness Jesus describes. If we are standing on the side of life, it must mean we are opposed to what would steal it away or destroy it. In the early Christian community, some of that difficult sense was likely even present in families, so the divisions Jesus names weren't prescriptive but descriptive for those who were having to face the hard realities of life not going as it should.

This soul-threatening destruction is also the sense in the book "Lord of the Flies." Those young people on the jungle island turned from supporting each other and caring for each other instead toward Beelzebub and that corrupting influence. Even while they still lived, they lost what the point of life was. They didn't need to bow down to idols to lose track of the goodness God intends in their lives. The way of death came to hold dominion or dominance in their existence instead of the way of life.

That brings us directly to the reading from Romans. Alongside the divisive Gospel reading, this may feel quite pleasant. But I also want us to pause with it to continue hearing some shock. As it talks about baptism, and as we are preparing to turn toward the font for Rakesh Allen in just a minute, I've been feeling this passage this week not only with our standard Lutheran ears but also with Rakesh's mother's ears, with non-Christian Hindu ears. As we said to begin, this may not present ourselves with our best foot forward, because it could be terrifying that the reading proclaims what we're doing in these waters is putting her son to death, co-crucifying him with Jesus, killing his old self. For this nine-month old, we probably maintain a notion of innocence and original

* http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/proper_7a/

blessedness, of the goodness of God's creation. For Rakesh, we'd likely be ready to argue against Plato who wanted to claim that this life is corrupt.

But if we don't see babies as bad, why is Rakesh being put to death? Why do we claim he needs a new life?

For that, the importance of this sacrament is in its proclamation of dominion, of who or what is Lord, and who can control our existence. This precisely is a statement against the corrupt and defiling ways. In the baptismal service, we state it as a rejection of sin, of turning away from the forces of evil, the devil, and his empty promises. You'll be invited to join in that rejection with a hearty and lively "I renounce them!" As much as they try to convert and spoil you, to subvert the goodness, to turn you toward fears and frustrations and feuds, baptism gives you the power to say "No!"

In a strange sense, our Christian theology proclaims that those powers of evil are defeated at the very moment they seemed to be victorious. Jesus can risk sharing with you that "those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose life will find it" because in the ultimate sense that's exactly what happened to him. The death-dealing powers of oppressive might and greedy influence put Jesus to death. In that would be the clearest example that their dominion won, their lordship prevailed. But in the resurrection, we proclaim that their way of death was only a lordship of stink, the mastery of dung. Death had been undone by the Lord of life.

And what we proclaim in baptism for Rakesh and for you is that those deadly powers are now impotent. They have no control over you. The Lord of the Flies has lost, has been exterminated. Since you have died with Jesus to evil and sin and live now only to God's ways. The only thing that can rule for you now is life.

That is what finally has control. So even while the old ways continue to try to corrupt or cause consternation, you can retort that you have been baptized and can find encouragement and stand steadfast that God's goodness will not be undone, that resurrection gives you confidence in the Lord of life. With that assurance, you are free to join in sharing the risk of the struggle for life, not just for yourself in the survival of the fittest, but on behalf of all of God's good creation.

So let's get ready for it, as it's renewed in ourselves and as we witness Rakesh Allen is enlisted not only for the struggle, but celebrating that he is alive, now and forever.