

Easter 7 / B
Oysters and Jesus, Pearls and Grit
 May 16, 2021

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

It's common knowledge that oysters sometimes make pearls; and that little tidbit has been used to illustrate many a point. You may have also heard another fact about oysters and pearls, a truth that gives it, I think, more power. It seems pearls aren't automatic or guaranteed. When an oyster somehow gets a piece of grit or a bit of sand inside its shell, then one of two things will happen: either the oyster will create a pearl, or it will die. The pearl, then, this thing of beauty and value - is ultimately the oyster's way of staying alive after something very irritating has gotten past its shell and into its very being.

Take that little bit of marine biology as background, as we are offered a grain of sand this morning, a bit of irritation in the Gospel for today, something small and rough that can slip past our hard, protective shells and give us something to work on. We - and indeed the Church itself, in this and every generation - need to work on this bit of sand very carefully. It will not go away, and we will either make of it a pearl, or, in one way or another, we will die.

For us, the grit (like the oyster's sand) contained in the Gospels is often small and well hidden – until, that is - until the irritation begins.

The Gospel passage we just heard is a portion of what is called the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. The time is “the night in which he was betrayed.” Jesus is praying for his disciples – those gathered with him in that Upper Room, and all those disciples yet to come. Jesus prays for us. He prays for our unity, for our joy, and for our safety and protection. Jesus reminds us that we are not of the world, but that we should nonetheless remain in the world - for our ministry is to be in the world, and to the world, and for the world.

(Sidebar: When Jesus says “world” here, he's not talking about the created order - rocks and trees, bunnies and foxes and ponies, and things like that; instead, he's talking about human society, organized as it sees best to promote its own purposes. Jesus is talking about our society, our culture, our various human institutions - the “world” in that sense - doing what it usually does – business as usual – maintaining the status quo.)

And Jesus says this about his disciples: that the world has hated them because they are not of the world. This hatred is to be the fate, indeed it is to be one real, distinguishing mark, of all who follow Jesus. Disciples of Christ are to stand out in the world, because they don't really fit in with the world.

Now, the irritating bit of grit for us oysters is this: When was the last time the world hated you because you belong to Jesus, and not to the world? When was the last time your Christian faith so set you apart from the world's business as usual that you were met with anger, ridicule, or hatred? How about a little bit of contempt? Mild dislike? Perhaps a tiny bit of irritation? Personally, I admit that I don't like these questions, either. They hit too close to home.

But, hey, maybe Jesus was wrong; maybe, these days, after all these centuries, maybe we all *should* be of the world - maybe that's the way it's supposed to be by now. Maybe the Kingdom of God has arrived, and we just missed or misunderstood most everything about it, except for how convenient it is for us. Maybe . . . But, let's be honest, probably not.

From time to time, we need to ask whether we have become so totally caught up in our culture, become so totally *of* the world, that we have to work hard to discover if we are different, and how we are different; ask ourselves what it might look like for us to be different, and whether it's worth the effort, and the cost, to be different.

In many ways, it was easier for the Church in the early centuries. As a generally ignored and occasionally persecuted minority in a pagan culture, a lot of things were clear; there were some clear lists of do's and don'ts that set Christians apart. For example: Christians couldn't attend the public games; they couldn't hold any of several types of jobs; they couldn't join the army; they couldn't take part in government; had severely limited legal protection; and so on. Their culture, "the world" in which they lived, often ridiculed them or made them scapegoats, and occasionally killed them - and both sides - both the persecuted and the persecutors - pretty much knew why.

It's not so easy these days. And to make it even harder, modern attempts to come up with lists of popular things Christians can't do have usually been

rather silly. In fact, we Episcopalians have been downright smug in pointing out that we aren't like *those people* who say you can't dance, or wear make-up, or go to movies, or wear shorts, or whatever.

By the way, have you ever noticed that nobody ever really nails us on this? Instead of trying to establish God's disapproval for the waltz or bingo, *those people* could really hit home if they responded to our self-righteous lack of "cannot-do-lists" with another question. What if they said, "O.K., have your martini and go to the dance - but before you do, tell me: how *does* your faith affect your life; show me *how* it makes a difference"? That's the grit, the irritation, for us Episcopalian oysters.

One way we try to get out of this pinch can cause just as much trouble. That way is saying that it isn't our responsibility; telling ourselves that it isn't my job; that it's the Church's job to fix the world so there will be no conflicts between our faith and our culture for us to worry about. Then we remind ourselves that we are the Church. So, from time to time, we rear back and try to change everything within reach so we can be both righteous *and* of the world at the same time. Now, on one level, this is really, really good. We are called to engage the world, and we should try very hard to make things better - things like institutions, governments, systems, people, and ourselves. We need to do this; our faith demands it. But we need to avoid getting confused about what that means. And, it seems, we get confused quite easily.

It's sometimes easy to forget that God will bring in the Kingdom; we won't. And, even worse, we also find it very easy to begin supporting what we think is a good improvement in the world (for Christian reasons, of course); but end up holding on to the improvement, and forgetting the Christian part of it altogether. Of course, the best way to tell whether the cause or the Christianity is more important is by looking at how we treat people who don't agree with our improvement.

And we get confused when we forget that the Lord doesn't call us to be powerful or effective as the world defines power and effectiveness. The Lord doesn't call us to be successful, but faithful - to live his life, to follow his steps, to advance his ministry, to proclaim the Good News of his Gospel. After all, of the twelve disciples, Judas was the most effective at using both money and the powers-that-be to get what he wanted. So, trying

to fix the world, while an important thing to do, isn't really the pearl we are called to produce.

And this sermon is about the irritating grit, not the beauty of the pearls. We *don't* have a list of rules telling us how *not* to be of the world, and that's not because we think this stuff is unimportant; it's because we know that things of this importance are not controlled and defined by lists. Still, and at the same time, we do know, and we must never forget, that the way we treat each other, and the way we treat our bodies, and our time, our money, our promises, and our planet - the way we treat all of the things we call "mine" - these are and will remain very important - and our Lord and his Church have some important things to say about them. This side of the Kingdom of Heaven, the "world" as Jesus spoke of it, the world as business as usual, this will always, in one way or another, be the alternative to Christian faithfulness and not the means to it.

So, how do we do this? How do we live faithfully and honestly, rationally, prudently, and with integrity, in the midst of a world that is really quite far from the Kingdom? How do we do this without being trivial, without being silly, and without minimizing either the depth of the tension between the Gospel and the world or the importance of our response? These are pretty gritty questions. And taking this challenge seriously amounts to some of the most important pearl-making work the Church has on its agenda.

Ultimately, it boils down to the question of who we are, and how we are to live.

And we need to take this all irritating grit and make of it these pearls, or we will die – perhaps not physically, but certainly spiritually and emotionally. We need to look honestly at "the world", the culture and institutions around us, and at who we are - and then pay careful attention to, and take concrete steps toward becoming, the person and the Church the Lord would have us be. We may even discover that Jesus was right, and that, in one way or another, the world will hate, or at least misunderstand, us. But the Lord continues to pray for us. We are promised all of the help we need. The grit of the world still irritates. And these pearls will come from the oddest places. Perhaps even from you!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.