

“The Things that Trap Us”

- Do you remember that book you probably read in high school called, Where the Red Fern Grows?
 - Me either- full disclosure, I only remember the title, and only after a little prompting
 - But there is this wonderful resource out there called the internet that really helps people like me with a poor memory¹
 - What I remembered was the raccoon trap described in that book
 - The main character, Billy, needs to capture a raccoon to use to train his two new dogs
 - That's when the internet came to my rescue and pointed me to a synopsis of the book
 - And even helpful diagrams of this raccoon trap
 - It's the one where you make a box, and drill a hole in it, and I think the book used nails or something sharp to partially cover the hole
 - And you put something shiny in the box.
 - Supposedly raccoons will reach in with their paw to grab the shiny object, and thereby making a fist
 - And the fist will be too big then to remove thanks to the nails
 - This trap design was actually patented in 1912 and called the “Shurehold” Trap²
 - There is a lot of debate on the internet as to whether this will really work
 - Supposedly the raccoon will chose to hang on to that shiny thing and remain trapped, instead of letting go of it and escaping.
- Now maybe it's just me, but there seems to be an object lesson in there somewhere
 - And I think that if we took a close look at our lessons today, we might find that Jesus was teaching that same lesson
 - About what to hold on to, and what to let go of.

¹ <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/redfern/summary/>

² <https://www.newjerseyhunter.com/threads/raccoon-trap-from-where-the-red-fern-grows.115914/post-1809151>

- We catch up with Jesus today in the Gospel of Mark chapter 6
- We have for several weeks now been hitting the highlights of the Gospel of Mark chronologically
- And you can tell it is still early in Jesus' ministry, as his family keeps making appearances
- About a month ago, they came to try and restrain him- he had embarrassed them, they tried to take him home
- Today Jesus returns home and the people know him, they know his family, they probably remember watching him grow up
- They even ask: is not this the carpenter? The son of Mary? The brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and sisters?!
- It's a big family
- They know him, and they know what to expect of him, and they in a sense refuse to allow him to be anything else, even if God is behind it
- And you might be tempted to think that they would be most proud of him, most eager to hear him and follow him
- Maybe a little hometown pride here
- But no, they reject him, not because of what he was doing and teaching, but because of who they thought they knew him to be
- And Jesus healed a few people, the few exceptions
- And Jesus was amazed at their unbelief...
- This crowd, these people who have watched Jesus grow up, they just cannot get free of the trap of their preconceived notions
 - They cannot let go of what they knew to be true, and what they think should be true
 - Even if God is doing surprising things
 - And I do not mean to belittle them- I have been there before
 - I have been the one before telling God what is and is not possible, or remaining convinced that my understanding of things is the right one
 - Of limiting God by simply refusing to let go
 - I wonder sometimes, after knowing in my life how many times God has come through and surprised me
 - Made ways where there were none, changed the rules of the game I thought I was playing
 - I wonder knowing how many times it has happened, how many times maybe I missed out because I just couldn't get there
 - Have you experienced that?
 - The moment when you realize that what you thought was not possible, or what you thought was inevitable,

- And God challenged you to let that go in faith, to turn it all over to God, and pull your hand out of that trap.
- Just a quick mention here, Paul is writing his second letter to the church in Corinth
- And he just does a terrible job at a humble brag
- You know what I mean? ³
 - “On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.”
 - “I refrain from [boasting], so that no one may think better of me... even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.”
- But perhaps we can appreciate what he is trying to do- trying to get himself out of God’s way and God’s work
- Trying to let go of the obstacle that is his own pride, in Paul’s own little way
- Trying to see God’s strength in the midst of his own weakness, struggles, successes and failures
- Yes, I can appreciate that...
- It’s a lesson I think Jesus is trying to illustrate to the disciples just after the events at his hometown
 - What could he do to help them let go and let God?
 - What’s the lesson that might produce a shift in thinking, shake them out of the trap that is what they know, and what they expect
 - To make them start looking and seeing for God’s work in unexpected ways and places
 - Jesus sends them out two by two, and does so completely unprepared
 - They only get a staff: no bread, no bag, no money- just sandals, one layer of clothes, and a staff
 - They are completely dependent on God, and God’s work in the people around them in very tangible ways
 - I do think that is to shake them from their own sense of self-reliance, expectation, even security...
 - Because those things can trap us...
 - Possessions can own us
 - Expectations and experience can be assets, but they can also limit us.
 - Imagine putting everything on the line, imagine going to another town with nothing but your faith and the clothes on your back
 - Now imagine what WE can do with what we have- as individuals...
 - As a nation, as a church.

³ http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp9_RCL.html#nt1

- Not with what we used to have, or what we hope we will have
- But what can God do with us as we are now?
- It is the fourth of July today, and the weather looks perfect this weekend!
 - We are celebrating the founding of our nation, and all that comes with it
 - Our religious freedom, as I wrote about in my Sword article this week
 - Our freedom from tyranny through the right to vote
 - Our constitutional rights and freedoms we all hold dear
 - I am proud of those things
 - And as a patriotic Christian, I want more for us than even that
 - I want our country to look at its shadow side, the parts of history that we prefer to ignore and overlook, because that's how you heal
 - The times when we decided groups of people do not get freedom or rights as some others do
 - The violence we have perpetrated towards people within our boundaries and without
 - The damage to our environment that do
 - We have things we need to let go of- things that are trapping us and holding us back as a nation
 - We still have a lot of work to do to ensure all of its people get those same freedoms- get justice, and equality
 - And we have lot of work yet to do to love our neighbors, treat the foreigner well, and look to the divine image in every human being
 - That's what God wants of us.
- I admit, I am thinking a lot about the parish too, the future, the past
 - All of it
 - It's a product of coming out of the pandemic, I think, and also transitioning to a single clergy parish rather than two
 - My spiritual director asked me this week, he said, "Pray, and ask God what it is that God wants you to preach to the parish"
 - And I guess then as I read this gospel, and we have to amazing and contrasting example before us
 - The hometown crowd who could not let go, and so did not get a "deed of power" as the gospel writer puts it
 - Versus the disciples, who were sent out with nothing to lose, but so much to gain
 - And I cannot help to see something here for us today, something about change, and about letting go
 - And not being trapped.
 - It comes at a big moment for us, phase 5, a vestry vote to sell a house, a parish-wide meeting and vote soon

- And while I am working with the staff to plan out the next program year
- It comes at a point where there is lots of unknown about the future and what the implications for this church- and every church- will be after COVID
- It can be anxiety producing- so what does God want to tell us?
- I certainly do not have a direct line to God here
 - Just an open heart and the belief that we can only discern God's will together
 - And these conversations we are having are exactly the kind we need
 - Just recently, the vestry has voted to sell a house and put that money into a designated fund- not the annual budget
 - A fund like our other designated funds that would keep that money and make some interest
 - In the end, that's the technical question- how to manage our assets wisely and marshal them best for the church's ministry
 - Whatever answer we come to- that's actually the easy part
 - The harder part, what's under the surface, is what does St. Michael's look like today, and will in the foreseeable future?
 - Questions like: what about a second priest- when will we be able to afford one again?
 - When will we return to the "golden years" of parish life?
 - Will everyone come back when COVID and the summer are over?
 - And I have no answers to these questions
 - But I remember: Jesus changed the world with a handful of faithful women and men
 - Who went out with little more than sticks in their hands, and each other by their side
 - And maybe we too can accomplish the amazing things God has in store for us
 - If we release the past and release our fear, abide in the present, and see the future through the eyes of hopeful faith that is in God's hands
 - If we keep walking step by step, giving it to God and letting it go,
 - God can and will use us too, no matter our shape and size
 - So what is the message that I think God wants me to speak to the parish, to say to you, to hear myself?
 - It's this: can you identify the things that are shiny and tempting to you, and that trap you?
 - Maybe it is in regards to this parish and our community of faith
 - Maybe it is in regards to your personal journey- the thing that you cannot let go of- cannot give to God

- The thing that keeps you from walking by faith
- Today, can we all turn over something to God, and really believe that God can do more with it than we can ever do
- Jesus could not do great deeds of power there because they could not let go of the Jesus they used to know
- Imagine what God can do with us, if we start letting go and letting God, in our nation, in our lives, and in our church.

Amen.