

KGL+  
Sermon  
Trinity Church Boston  
Year B Proper 21  
September 29, 2024

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

In eighth grade, flight jackets were deemed the cool item to own at my school. They were slightly puffy, shiny, sleek—also known as bomber jackets, they were the thirteen-year old’s key to insider social status. Also, they were comfortable, which was a huge selling point to me.<sup>1</sup>

Taking my social aspirations in hand, I scoured the depths of our family closet for a jacket which fit the description (as families in New England have swaths of coats for every season and climate usually crushed into a hall closet) and finally located one I would be proud to wear—it was puffy, olive green, not as shiny, but looked enough the part, and awaited Monday morning hallroom with anticipation.

Anyone who has been a tween or teen knows that this story will end as many do from those periods of our lives—and I suspect that, if you are sitting here on a Sunday in the sanctuary, willing and wanting and perhaps needing to listen to stories of God’s love and presence, then you yourself have most likely had a similar experience as this one.

I wore that jacket proudly to school on Monday morning, only to be informed by the powers that be (which was the social circle that everyone wanted to be a part of) that I was wearing the wrong kind of jacket. But it’s a flight jacket, I heard myself keep saying. It’s the same as yours.

It's the wrong kind of flight jacket, was the response.

Apparently, the right kind of jacket came from one particular store and was required to have had no previous life prior to being purchased off the rack. It’s possible that I pointed out that the one I was wearing probably had been used as a flight jacket, and so, counted its legitimacy even more.

But the verdict was that I was wearing a ‘fake flight jacket’ per the prevailing social standard, and was therefore consigned the outermost depths of 8<sup>th</sup> grade sartorial purgatory.

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<sup>1</sup> For a visual: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flight\\_jacket#:~:text=Civilian%20uses,-Baseball%20bomber%20jacket&text=In%20the%201970s%20and%201990s,style%20bomber%20jacket%20became%20popular](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flight_jacket#:~:text=Civilian%20uses,-Baseball%20bomber%20jacket&text=In%20the%201970s%20and%201990s,style%20bomber%20jacket%20became%20popular).

Today, we experience a redux of last week's gospel- last Sunday, the disciples were arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest of the group.<sup>2</sup> In the reading, there was an awkward pause when Jesus arrived halfway through their conversation, and questioned the disciples as to what the hot topic was—and then admonished them yet again for not understanding his mission: that the last would be first and first would be last, and that they were all not heading into fame, but inexorably towards their deaths.<sup>3</sup>

So, clearly that lesson didn't work as well as we might have imagined it would have— even coming directly from Jesus!—and in today's gospel, the disciples are again excited to one up the local competition who are also performing healings in Jesus' name. But 'Teacher', John says, they aren't the 'right' disciples, and so we tried to stop them.<sup>4</sup>

I do believe that the competitive ego-driven edge of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade hallroom never quite ends; we just morph it into other acceptable “adult” arenas and areas where we wish to model our personal exceptionalism through means of exclusion. Jesus had just chastised the disciples for being competitive with one another, and so naturally, their response is to prove themselves greater than those outside of their circle, which they believe will smooth things over by offering Jesus a little ego-boost.

Which goes about as well as you would imagine with Jesus.

Because there is no room for ego when the inevitable ending for Jesus is the cross and tomb.

This season, we are on the back nine of the Gospel of Mark, a downward slope stemming from Peter's acclamation of Jesus as Messiah (note that John calls him 'Teacher', tsk tsk tsk), and Jesus' affirmation that the Messiah will suffer and die and rise again on the third day. Glory is no longer isolated from suffering—in fact, they are comingled elements, each deepening the other, discomfitting those used to them being distinct and distinctive.

And it is in this moment when Jesus tells his disciples that their quest for exclusive rights to his glory comes at a cost: “Whoever is not against us is for us”, Jesus says to them.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mark 9:30-37

<sup>3</sup> I don't know where the phrase came from, but since I began studying religion/ scripture in 1997, the phrase 'inexorable' has been used multiple times referencing the movement of Mark's gospel towards the cross and crucifixion. I've even Googled the phrase to see if I can't retrace where it came from, but it's been the primary descriptor of the gospel for 25 years.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mark 9:38-51

<sup>5</sup> Mark 9:40

In our Wednesday online Bible Study, our small group thought that this had been a typo—much more familiar to us is the corollary-- “whoever is not for us is against us”.<sup>6</sup>

And that is true in so many respects—the key to creating a community ethos and unity always includes defining oneself in relation to another group. You are a Hatfield or a McCoy. You are either DC or Marvel Universe. You are a farmer or a cowman.<sup>7</sup> You are a Red Sox fan or a supporter of literally any team playing the Yankees. We wear clothing with specific teams and locales and schools on them because they are a source of our personal identity. We wear crosses and collars to proclaim our faith and how it informs our choices.

Which is all fine until it becomes a means of asserting power and ego-driven exclusion. And Jesus outlines to his disciples, who so deeply want Jesus to love them and think well of them, that their claim to righteousness without the necessary accompanying humility, will end poorly for all. They, and we, wish for the exclusive rights to glory and the accompanying power that that affords. As people of a Western civilization and having been nursed largely on the American dream of individual success, we read this as a civic right and moreover, our destiny, in one form or another. To dream anything else is to dream smaller; to dream weaker.

And so Jesus’ words to his disciples in response to this instinct feel jarring to us: “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.”<sup>8</sup> You can’t have it all, Jesus tells his disciples. You can’t assume God’s glory without God’s humility and humiliation. You can’t proclaim a Gospel which preaches love when your modus operandi is the regular diminishment and belittlement of others—even of others with whom you disagree. In the legal system in the time of Jesus, where removing hands or feet or eyes for misdemeanors was common and consigned the punished to a recognizably marginalized status, consider the choice Jesus presents to the disciples: being an outsider in this life is preferable than being separated from God for eternity. Choose the loss of hand and not the soul. Let go of the status, the exclusive rights to being in the inner circle, and choose instead a life which is the opposite of hell—not the fiery destination of Dante where people who have too much fun go, but hell as in the self-distancing, self-isolation from God, and all that God offers us in love. Hell is all that which tells us that we are alone; and that we deserve to be alone; and that no one would ever or will ever love us, because we are unlovable and worthless. That hell will burn us more than fire ever could.

Jesus’ disciples on some level believe that faithfulness is a game to be won. And so do we. No one lives their best life in order to be on the losing team—and even if we are, we’ll come up with

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 12:30a has the corollary to Mark 9:40—scholars suggest that the difference was due to context and not intent, and that it wasn’t a author or community indication that they understood Jesus’ words in a different manner. Context always matters :)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Rodgers and Hammerstein: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5aWawFdaXs>

<sup>8</sup> Mark 9:43

a PR plan to reframe it as “An Underdog Story” or as a stored interview response to ‘how did a failure help you grow?’ No, we along with the disciples share the assumption that someone else’s success indicates our failure, that this is a zero-sum game we are compelled to play. Jesus says to the disciples, to us, stop that. There is enough. Spend your energy doing the work of fostering love and pointing always to God’s grace, and less energy on pointing fingers at the ‘fake believers’ and policing the gates of heaven. Glory is paired always with humility for the followers of Jesus. If we wish for one, we must accept the other. Glory and humility will not cancel each other out. They will bring us closer to a God who was transfigured, and condemned, and crucified, and resurrected.

The God who tells us that hell is a form of isolation commends us to break what often comes as our first and easiest love: the love of being acclaimed right; as the most special; as the arbitrator of who is in and who is out. That job is above our pay grade, our skill set and our security level, and thankfully in the hands of God alone.

Beloved Church, wear the fake flight jacket. Compliment those who do so as well. Give thanks for all who wish to join in, as they are and with what they have, for God in Christ included us first, descended to us in humility and love, and is glorified always when we come with what we have and share it with love.

Amen.