

**“No Rescue in Sight”**  
**Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; James 1:17-27**  
**Rev. Andrew Connors**  
**Proper 17**  
**August 29, 2021**

It's a Brown Memorial kind of scripture fest today. What counts to God, according to Jesus isn't your ritual acts by themselves. What counts to God is your ethical behavior - the things that come out of your heart and flow into the world: the way you relate to other people. Be doers of the Word, James, says, not just hearers of it. Religion that is pure and undefiled is to care for widows and orphans - the least of these - in James' time. Public ethics is what counts.

“Public ethics is what counts” is so deeply a part of this congregation that we don't even think twice about it. It's the reason so many Brown Memorialites prefer Sunday School topics on climate change or interfaith relations to Bible study. It's the reason we can turn out 50 people for a BUILD action, or raise funds for direct COVID relief more easily sometimes than we can meet our own budget. It's the reason we can build a non-gendered restroom and nobody bats an eye. It's the reason our prayers are heavy on requests for help for other people - people who are seeking healing near or refugees from Afghanistan afar and those same requests are light on more religious minded praise reports. Public ethics is what counts.

Which may be why so many of us are struggling with the state of the world. I know I've been struggling. I made the mistake of reading the Sun from my vacation and hearing about parents of children who are comparing mask wearing to child abuse and dishonoring Black people who have died at the hands of police by attaching “I can't breathe” to their actions. I'm despondent that the climate continues to scream at us through storms and fires and heat trying to get our attention before it's too late to avoid the coming death and yet we still suck energy like it's not killing our children's future. And I despair when I read that small sets of health care workers, and larger groups of first responders are protesting vaccine mandates - the very thing that gives us a greater chance of being safe.

It's precisely because of our “public ethics counts” theology that I'm so very disturbed by what is happening in the world - angry and fearful, and more and more cynical in my relationship to fellow human beings.

Like some of you, I've tried changing some of my daily habits, hoping that a change in what I'm exposed to might help alleviate some of my loss of faith in my fellow citizens and loss of hope in the future. I've listened less to the news and more to music. Spent more time on my bike trying to cycle the cynicism out of my body. I've tried accepting the advice that I've given so often to others who are angry or grieving or

despondent - be gentle with yourself. Take the nap. Have the pampering cup of afternoon coffee. Go for the walk. Spend time with friends.

I nearly succeeded in getting away from it all on vacation. The first four days I had planned out perfectly. A 30 mile hike through the backcountry of the Great Smokeys. Just me, my first-time backpacking friend, and everything we would need on our backs. There I could get away from the endless depressing news cycle - no cell phone signal in the backcountry. I was ready for the plants and the birds with new guides I planned to utilize. We planned every detail precisely - 2 of 3 nights by the healing waters of flowing streams, an intersection with the iconic Appalachian Trail up to Clingmans Dome - for views of the Blue Ridge mountains from the highest point on the AT; bear spray on my belt, I was hoping, evening expecting that we'd have the privilege of running into some of those marvelous creatures.

And then came the rain. Every single night - downpours - which was manageable, even relaxing, until the 3rd afternoon when the heavens opened and didn't close for 2 solid days. I realized later that we hardly saw any animals because, unlike us, they had checked the weather. They sensed the remnants of the tropical storm that was coming. I didn't take it as a sign from God so much as a metaphor for the last 18 months. Plan all you want, Andrew - it's all going to turn to mud and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it. A metaphor from which there is no escape. As we trudged 8 miles through a tropical storm - soggy and weighed down by wet gear - it occurred to me that a "public ethics is what counts" faith is only energizing when conditions allow for it.

When a people rally together around eradicating COVID-19 by getting vaccinated as a sign of our love for our neighbor. When a world decides you know we really do want this planet to be inhabitable for our children and grandchildren - we do share that urgency together. When a nation decides in advance of every conflict - you know we've read our history and we realize that wars are rarely won - more often they leave people dead, maimed, and divided. We would better spend our money and time trying to bridge conflicts instead of being coerced into believing we can win all of them.

A public ethics is what counts faith works best when we are seeing some results. But we're not. We are not winning any of those battles at the moment. We haven't decided we share the desire to preserve the planet. Some of us won't sacrifice our personal freedoms in order to defeat COVID. We still haven't absorbed the true cost of war. Which makes a public ethics is what counts kind of religion pretty difficult to sustain. It's not a wrong kind of faith. It's just insufficient for the reality of the human condition.

Jesus says more than just "public ethics" counts, which is easy for a public ethics counts person like me to overlook. He says that those public ethics - what we see in our actions - grow from the inside out. You can whip yourself into action all you want but if you're not paying attention to the inside sooner or later the hopelessness, the

despondency, the despair will show up on the scene. And that's the part of Jesus' words that I think a public ethics kind of people can so easily gloss over.

You see, we've had plenty of examples of religious people who care more about the rituals than the ethics. Who take our most deeply cherished ideas about God's love and justice and twist them into systems of shame or performance. It's understandable that a public ethics people will squeeze that truth for every ounce of its juice.

But what do you do when the hope runs out? What do you do when the appeal to love your neighbor falls on deaf ears? What do you do when fellow citizens prove as one friend said recently, that Americans can't do group projects? From what I see and hear and sometimes feel you despair or fear or give up. I think this is why Anne Lamott, in a recent conversation said that most of life is an inside job. That the things that keep us from loving and giving and serving others and have us, instead, judging, and criticizing, and fearing are more related to our inner stories than they are to our external realities.

In her most recent book, *Dusk, Night, Dawn: On Revival and Courage*, Lamott describes a close friend in recovery and church whose twenty-two year-old son has incurable brain cancer. "How on earth," she writes, "do we sustain any optimism at all, not give up on life, and stay more or less okay one day at a time in the face of such a devastating reality and prognosis." Lamott was speaking of her friend but she could have been speaking about our world today. Her friend didn't have glorified answers. Giving up isn't an option, she told her. She lives with so much she can't control that it would be foolish to try. Sometimes, she confided, she wishes she were dead, not because she's suicidal but because there are some kinds of exhaustion that feel like they can't be addressed. And then when all of that's named she practices, she told Anne Lamott, what she calls lunch-money faith: "nothing dramatic, and just enough."<sup>1</sup>

Personally, I bristle at prescribing that kind of a faith. I've spent a lot of my preaching life pushing to see what more we can do, what more we can achieve, what more we can be together. I believe in that kind of faith. But sometimes neighbors don't want to love each other. Some battles can't be won in the short-term. Sometimes working harder doesn't make the rain stop. And in those times we'd do best to pay attention to what's happening on the insides not because public ethics doesn't count, but because a public faith can't be sustained by a weary, exhausted people. It will just produce more Peters denying the faith at the wrong time, or more Judas' speaking loudly about needing to give the poor as a narcissistic performance instead of a practice.

"Jesus is never really doing all that much," Anne Lamott writes shockingly. "He doesn't even tell his own stories. He'd be fired from most churches today. He's in a world of great fear, there's evil, violence, and need all around him, so he often finds he needs time alone - in silence, in the desert, on the mountain, on the beach, beneath the

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Dusk, Night Dawn: On Revival and Courage*, (New York: Riverhead Books), 2021, p. 100.

stars - to get strong and patient enough to go back and face Peter's lame and endless questions for the tenth time: "is now when we get to be in charge? Is now when we take over?"

"Even now," she continues, "we aren't in charge of much, and it is exhausting to believe or pretend we are. The best we can do is to help the poor, get some rest, help the pets at mealtime, observe the rules of health and safety during the virus. Watching the ways we try to be in charge can help us get our sense of humor back, and laughter is a holy and subversive battery charge."<sup>2</sup> Lunch money faith.

Back in the Smokies, loading up our packs with every part of us drenched in heavy rain, my friend proved much better at knowing what to do to accept the day before us. "Don't take this personally," she told me knowing that I otherwise would, "but I'm probably going to cry today. It's not about you. It's just that the weather sucks and this will help me get through these next 8 miles." I wish everyone in our church could be that clear and self-aware when what's wrong is that the world is outside our control. I wish I could be that clear and mature.

As we trudged along through pools on the trail, with the waters of the adjacent river growing strong and dangerous, I remembered our laughter the previous day when a family, trying to find their way from Clingmans Dome back to the parking lot located only a few football fields away where they had parked their car, ended up several miles lost in the woods. Lost, until they stumbled upon our campsite, thirsty and scared and cussing at each other in a language I don't know. "Thank God," the mother blurted out upon seeing us, "we're rescued! Take us to the nearest parking lot." When I explained that the nearest parking lot was nearly 3 miles and a thousand feet back up the mountain the way they had come, the father who had led them down the path in the first place, protested. "There's got to be another way," he said. I showed him the map but he looked around as if the more reasonable route would be to expect a ladder to descend from heaven for an escape. "What's the chance of a rescue?" the mom asked us, dead serious. "I don't think they are going to send a helicopter to get you to the parking lot," I said. "Plus, somebody would have to hike there to ask for it."

The color drained out of the mom's face as it began to dawn on each of them that there would be no rescue. There was no easy way out. Acceptance was hard to come by. "Well," the mom said, holding back tears, "we're just going to have to support each other." We filtered more water and sent them on their way. As soon as they were out of eye sight, the family cussing started up again, loud and clear for the next half mile. At least they won't run into any bears, I thought.

Back on day 3, wet and miserable on our way to our own parking lot, I looked back at my friend. "What are the chances of a rescue?" I asked. She smiled and cussed through the rain. "I guess we'll just have to support each other, you miserable son-of-a- . . .!!"

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 109.