Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right . . .

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, October 1, 2017

As some of you know, I grew up in a pretty tough neighborhood in New Jersey, which means I was socialized to think of myself as surrounded by groups of hostile people who were basically out to get me. And, I suppose, in order to deal with this, the guys I hung out with divided the world outside our tight little group into two types of people. On the one hand were all the jerks of the world. As in “Can you believe that jerk?” “Did you hear what that guy said?” “Yeah, what a jerk!” And, on the other hand, were all the wackos of the world. As in “Wow, that guy is a real wacko!” “Yeah, Can you believe that nut-job?” I guess it was my own New Jersey version of “clowns to the left of me jokers to my right, here I am stuck in the middle with you.” Now that I’ve grown up a bit, and read a bit of history, I realize this sorting of the world into hostile groups is not unique to my New Jersey neighborhood. The ancient Greeks basically divided outsiders into two groups: enemies, on the one hand, and barbarians, on the other. Enemies and barbarians. Six of one, half a dozen of the other.

I suppose we all do this to some extent or another. Depending on your point of view, we may be surrounded by right-wing fanatics, the loony left, or God help us, New York Yankee fans! We all seem to do this, except, of course, Canadians, like my wife, who I must say are disgustingly nice. Bunch of wackos if you ask me.

For me, growing up where I did, I can honestly say that the only thing that saved me from this way of thinking is that my parents forced me to go to church. Now, despite this act of outrageous authoritarianism, my parents were - and are – good, kind and loving people. But -- and maybe this is a generational thing, as I look around today and see how involved parents are in almost every aspect of their children’s lives – as I think back on my childhood I wonder where my parents were. I knew they loved me, of course, but they seemed to inhabit this mysterious adult world, from which they would occasionally pause and glance in my direction and then turn back to whatever else they were doing. For example, most days, I could just say to my mom “I’m going out to play” and she would respond, “That’s nice honey, be home by supper.” And off I would pedal on my bike without a helmet into an un-chaperoned world of kids. Honestly, I could have been out robbing liquor stores for all my mother knew. Just as long as I got home in time for supper, everything was fine. Just a quick look up from my mother after I returned to check for mud on my feet or blood or my face and then she turned back to whatever she was doing. But, from out of this inscrutable adult world and into my childhood paradise my parents decreed that we would go to church. No discussion. No concern for how I felt about it. No matter what, when Sunday came, our rear ends were going to be in church.

And it is in church that I learned about Jesus. And even as a kid, I realized that Jesus challenged all my attempts to divide the world into groups of people who are less important, less valuable, less sane, less whatever than me and my small group. You know all those wackos out there? Jesus died for them. You know all those jerks in the world? Jesus said to love your enemies. You know all those tax collectors and prostitutes? In our Gospel lesson, Jesus tells the upright religious authorities of his day, that they are going into the kingdom of heaven before them. This was a simple enough message even for my disaffected childhood self to get. All the
jerks and wackos, jokers and clowns are going to be ahead of me on that parade into the kingdom of heaven. I just hoped there would be a place for smart alec kids riding Schwinn bicycles in the back of the line.

St. Paul is pretty clear in our Epistle lesson as well. He says, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” By which he means that we should imitate Christ in his humility. Paul says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” It is simple and clear enough. But there is still something in my New Jersey soul that wants to resist and to argue. Why? Why act this way, when you know the way the world is? What about all the clowns and jokers out there who will take this attitude as an invitation to walk all over you?

I suppose the answer to these questions is pretty clear. It’s the Gospel. The Gospel that is really pretty easy to understand and that Paul speaks of clearly and directly. That Christ Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

So much for my division of the world into jerks and wackos. So much for our dividing the world into enemies and barbarians. So much for distinctions between the righteous and the unrighteous. Instead, let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. In humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. In my case, this is still a work in progress.

So my parents -- besides forcing me to go to church -- didn’t really talk much about their faith. But they really were and are good and kind. My dad was a special education teacher and I remember one year that he had a student named “Junior.” This was kind of ironic because Junior’s father was absent and he was living with his adult sister who was an addict. For almost the whole school year, my dad would get up early so that he could pick up Junior and drive him to school. He did this so that he could get a little breakfast and often times get a clean change of cloths. It turned out other kids in school would tease Junior because he often came to school wearing dirty and smelly cloths. So my dad worked it out so that they could arrive early and if Junior needed it, there would be a clean change of cloths he could put on and he could throw his dirty cloths into the wash and have them ready for another day. He got Junior through the school year and was delighted a couple of years later when he graduated from high school.

I was old enough to admire what my dad was doing, but also young enough to think that it was also kind of nuts. My dad never really talked about why he did things like this. But he did make me go to church, to sit still in my pew, and to learn about Jesus.