

Sermon :: 06-Sept-2026
Proper 18, Year A

“ ‘Tell the whole congregation of Israel [for Me] that ... ’ ”

We’ve *all* been there. Someone’s asked you to do a task ... or even just *sees* you doing one. And after watching you for a minute or two ... they sidle over ... and say something like, ¶“You know, there’s an *easier* way to chop that onion”—even though you’ve been chopping onions just fine *your own* way, for *decades*. Or, ¶“If you ask me, it’s better to use *vinegar* to clean mirrors than that Windex *you’re* using”—even though you can’t *stand* the smell of vinegar. Or maybe, at the office, ¶“I don’t know why you *insist* on uploading those receipts one at a time, when you could just as easily *batch* them”—even though you’ve learned—the *hard* way—that when you save them up for batching, you usually *miss* a couple of them.

Yes, the dreaded *interloper* ... the *hover-er*... the ‘*sidewalk supervisor*,’ as my dad used to call them¹ ... the *BUTTINSKY*. They *mean* well ... genuinely *think* they’re offering helpful advice ... may even be willing to *lend a hand*. But when you’re already up to your elbows in onions, their proffer is distracting ... annoying; maybe even a little know-it-all-ish. So, you just nod and smile at them ... or politely (if, perhaps, a little stiffly) say, “That’s OK, I’ve got this” ... while, secretly, wishing they’d go find someone *else* to bother.

Now, I’m not going to *call* God a BUTTINSKY (!) ... but isn’t that kind of what happens in today’s Old Testament lesson? It’s the familiar story of the first Passover—the first seder, as it were²—the last, hurriedly prepared and hastily consumed meal before Israel marches to freedom through the Red Sea. The Israelites, no doubt, already *know* how to prepare a lamb³: which animal to select, and when ... how to season and prepare and portion out the meat ... what to serve *with* it. But God gives Moses and Aaron some *extremely* particular—*fussy*, even—instructions on *all* these points: It has to be a year-old male, without blemish ... can only be roasted, whole, and with bitter herbs (no mint jelly at *this* meal!) ... must be accompanied by unleavened bread ... and has to be eaten in its *entirety*: no leftovers or doggie bags. At the risk of being a little irreverent⁴ ... you can almost hear families muttering, as they build their fires, “What, does God think we’ve never *eaten lamb* before?!”

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I’m making light of things ... and when the BUTTINSKY’s advice concerns everyday household chores or mindless office tasks, we can usually just shrug it off or ignore it. But there are *other* times when people insert themselves ... and their unsolicited advice, their volunteered opinions ... into our lives, and make things really very *difficult*—*impossible* to ignore.

- Take, for example, the INSISTER: the person who, calmly but persistently, tells you the same thing, over and over again: “You *should* really get that checked out” ... or, “I think

¹ Although I now think this idiom more directly refers to someone who likes to watch others (like builders on a construction site) work, rather than one who necessarily ladles out unsolicited advice.

² Although, technically, God’s ordinance to observe an *annual* ritual to commemorate this *first* exodus meal doesn’t come until later (in Exod 13).

³ Which can, according to our text, be either a juvenile *sheep* or a juvenile *goat*.

⁴ There is a great deal of symbolism ... not to mention theology ... in the instructions God gives Israel for this night.

you're making too much of what she said" ... or maybe, "What you did really *hurt me*"

- Or the FIGHTER: the person who's convinced he's right and is itching to start an argument: "Give me three good reasons *why* you won't vote for him" ... or "What fairy tale did you pull *that* idea from?" ... or maybe, "Well! that's the last time you'll ever hear *me* say anything"
- And then there's the IMPASSE—not so much a *person* as a *situation*: "There's no point in even *talking to you*" ... or, "We're not having this same argument *again*" ... or maybe, "I've tried *everything*: I don't know how to get *through* to you"; or, still worse... just stony, impenetrable *silence*

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Ultimately, I think, each of our lessons today is about *peace*: *God's peace* ... which is to say: not the *false* peace of *avoiding* or *ignoring* conflict ... but the *true* peace of *resolving* it, in a spirit of love and intention, respect and care. And each lesson sheds a little light on how we can deal with the *non-trivial* BUTTINSKIES in our lives:

- In Exodus, as we've said, God is something of the INSISTER: God has a plan to free Israel, at last, from hideous slavery, and the people need to *follow* it *exactly* ... and so, God INSISTS: prepare the lamb *this way* ... put the blood on the doorposts *this way* ... eat it while dressed *this way*.
>> Now, our instinct, when someone keeps INSISTING that they're *right* ... or being *prudent* ... or simply *concerned* about us ... might be to ignore them ... or tell them they're wrong ... or say, "Yeah, well, try walking a mile in *my* shoes!" But in my *own* life experience ... when someone's making the effort—risking a tongue-lashing or even a rejection—to tell me the same thing again and again ... and/or if I'm hearing similar feedback from many *different* quarters, as if the whole *world's* INSISTING on something ... that's *sign*—a *holy* sign—that I need to *pause*: close my mouth ... open my mind ... and make myself available to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Who may be seeking to lead *me* through the mouths of *others* ... much as God uses Moses and Aaron to lead Israel to liberation.
- In Matthew, we hear Jesus' advice for what to do when INSISTENCE has boiled over into *CONFLICT*: search for grounds for *agreement*. His language about binding and loosing, and asking for God to do things in heaven, may be pitched a little *high* ... but I think the kernel of Jesus' wisdom is that if we and the people we're in *CONFLICT* with humbly and genuinely seek—*cultivate*—*agreement* among ourselves, *rather* than insisting on *my* way or the *highway* ... then we open our relationship ... our mutuality ... our love ... to the workings of the Holy One.
>> To take an example: You and a friend of yours disagree, vehemently, over an important issue, like climate change. ¶"It's human-made." / "No, it's not." ¶"We have to act *now*." / "Oh, there's still *plenty* of time." ¶"It could change *everything*—reshape human *destiny*." / "That's silly: We'll deal with this just like we've dealt with everything *else* nature's ever thrown at us."
>> Jesus' advice in this *CONFLICTED* situation is to look for even an *iota* of common ground ... keep peeling back the layers of your respective opinions until you discover *one*

idea you can *both agree* on.⁵ ¶ Maybe it's that as a human race, we need to ensure our survival, *regardless* of exactly *what* may be threatening us. ¶ Maybe it's that we have only one earth, and we need to heed *whatever* the recent data may be signaling. ¶ Maybe it's just that all over the world, climate patterns are changing, and we've got to *adjust* to them. *What* you agree on isn't nearly as important as that you've *reached an agreement* ... let some daylight into the darkness of your CONFLICT ... realized that, at root, you share at least *one* common *starting point* ... which you now can *leverage*, to pursue a common *resolution*.

- And finally, in St Paul's letter to the Romans, there is a *word*, I think ... perhaps an *oblique* word, but *still*, a *word* ... about dealing with IMPASSE: And that's to let *go* of ourselves—our desires, our ideas, our foibles and flaws⁶ ... and instead, “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”: *His* love, *His* decency, *His* light.
 >> While Paul doesn't say *how* to do this, I think *prayer* ... and especially *silent, wordless, listening* prayer: thoughts stilled, hearts opened, wisdom sought ... highly recommends itself. Since you're at IMPASSE, you do this *solo*, not as a *team* ... but still, over time—days, weeks, maybe even *months*—you begin to sense ... to discern ... to 'hear,' with your heart ... the *divine* pathway *out* of the IMPASSE: It could be ¶ “Explore *compromising* on this one; it's not an essential.” ¶ Or maybe, “Offer her another *opening*—and I'll pray, *with you*, that *this* time, it'll *take*.” ¶ Or perhaps, sadly-yet-mercifully, “There's no (human) way out of this stalemate; you may need to let it”—or “them”—*go*.” For in cases of abuse, willful indifference, infidelity or calculating manipulation ... sometimes Christ's *love* ✓ is *leaving*. Sometimes His *light* ✓ is *painful* to our eyes. Sometimes His *decency* ✓ is sheer self-*preservation*. But if you've opened yourself, regularly, sincerely and open-heartedly, to God's *direction* ... whatever solution comes to you, slowly but consistently, is likely to be God's *will*.

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We often suffer no lack of BUTTINSKIES ... no shortage of those who know what we should *do* ... should *say* ... should *believe* ... should *think* ... should *overlook* or put *up* with. And sometimes, we can laugh—or brush—they off.

But sometimes, the issue's too important ... the relationship too tender ... the consequences too great ... to either steadfastly *ignore* or endlessly *pick* at. If an INSISTER has invaded our space ... if a CONFLICT has engulfed us ... if an IMPASSE has pinned us in place ... we do well to seek *God's* peace ... through ¶ a spiritual *alertness* to those who may be *helping* us ... a spiritual *openness* to those who may *agree* with us, even if only at the margins ... a spiritual *discernment* concerning those who've shut us down—or, maybe, whom *we've* shut down. For *God* is the ultimate BUTTINSKY ... and *God's* advice is *always* sound.

⁵ In some circles, this approach is known as the Five Whys: You just keep asking each other *why* they feel that way ... until one person expresses an idea or a feeling the other can agree with, too.

⁶ As Paul puts it, “[M]ake no provision for the flesh [that is, in Paul's hermeneutic construct, the ways of *this* world—the ways we often seem to follow as ‘human nature’], to gratify its desires.”

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