

## **St Benedict Sermon – Sep 30, 2018**

Good morning, it's wonderful to be with you today!

My name is Aaron Scott and I work at Chaplains on the Harbor, a mission station of this diocese in rural Grays Harbor County WA. I'm here with my coworkers Rev. Sarah and James. We are a ministry of, by and for struggling people-- folks experiencing homelessness, incarceration, and living in poverty from Aberdeen to Westport. I'll tell you a little bit more about us in a minute but I wanted to look at this morning's reading's first.

Today, in our texts from the book of Numbers and the Gospel of Mark, we see the followers of Moses and Jesus running up to them, ratting out and challenging other people who have stepped up to also assert leadership. In Moses' case, a couple of people start prophesying in an inconvenient place, and Joshua says "Moses, stop them!" In the Gospel, the disciples try to stop someone from casting out demons in Jesus' name without their approval. In both cases, Moses and Jesus tell their followers, "Cut it out--these upstarts are getting the work done, that's what matters."

I appreciate this theme because it drives home the point that true leadership, in the biblical tradition, is not about falling in line with correct or pre-approved power-holders. It is not about taking orders from the correct people. Leadership, in the tradition of Moses and Jesus, at least as we read about it today, is about getting the job done. It's about healing people, speaking truth, and sharing the responsibility of liberation even when you don't have permission from established hierarchies to do so. Both Moses and Jesus more or less tell their people, in today's readings, "Quit throwing a fit about whether these people are

authorized by me. It's their results that legitimate them in my eyes-- not their titles, not their official positions, not their affiliations with the right people."

This model of leadership is important to us at Chaplains on the Harbor because we are a church of people who don't have permission to survive and who do it anyway.

Aberdeen is a town of roughly 16,000 with 1,000 people living on the streets. The local crisis of homelessness is directly tied to the capital flight of the timber industry. Logging shut down almost entirely in the 1990s and the primary industry that has sprung up to replace it is the business of incarceration. Stafford Creek state prison was built, and the county and municipal jails were expanded. The same families that produced (but did not reap) the wealth of one brutal industry with the labor of their own bodies in the forests a generation ago now generate the profits of another brutal industry in this generation, by the labor of their bodies behind bars.

There is an economic incentive to keep people poor, to keep people engaged in the drug economy, and to keep people committing acts of desperation because full jails generate local revenue. Criminalizing poor people is a business in Grays Harbor County.

Our juvenile detention facility incarcerates more children for non-violent, non-criminal offenses like truancy or running away from home than any other county in the United States and was successfully sued by the ACLU a few years ago for torturing a child.

This summer, the city of Aberdeen passed an ordinance outlawing sitting or lying down on sidewalks between the hours of 11pm and 6am.

Just last week, the mayor issued official notice that the largest homeless encampment in the county would be cleared-- with no alternative location for people to go-- and that any who remain can be subject to criminal trespassing. The city spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to purchase the land this encampment sits on, and to clear the area with city workers' labor, but has yet to spend anything on housing the people who reside there.

To simply exist as a homeless human being in Aberdeen, and countless other cities around this country, often means to defy the law. Every essential human activity-- using the bathroom, sleeping, sheltering yourself from the elements, staying warm, sitting down, sleeping-- is subject to criminalization. This means that continuing to survive anyway is a practice of daily civil disobedience. This is fertile ground indeed for raising up leaders in liberation-- leaders who do not wait for permission from the powerful to get things done.

Because we follow the homeless, criminalized, sanctified Jesus at Chaplains on the Harbor, we seek out and find leadership and moral authority among illegal encampments, squatting in abandoned buildings, and locked behind bars.

When God came to earth a poor and homeless infant, the structural sin and violence the Roman Empire's political and economic order was starkly revealed. By seeking and encountering God among the poor and the dispossessed today, the structural sin and violence of our own society is also revealed. Because in our work, we are not saving helpless

victims. We are lifting up the leadership of survivors-- people who have seen up close the depth of wrongness in our world.

People who have been scapegoated for every social ill in town while the players who actually created these conditions of resource extraction, mass unemployment and homelessness continue to sit at the top of the food chain.

We have witnessed homeless leaders going toe-to-toe with elected officials demanding respect, answers, and accountability. We have supported leaders going directly from jail to running a successful farming operation that creates local jobs and feeds local hungry people. We have been honored to walk with criminalized millennials on the wild journey from sleeping in a church shelter to testifying at senate hearings in DC with the Poor People's Campaign.

Our greatest strength and blessing as a ministry is our abundance of leadership. It is not the leadership of the top, but the leadership of the bottom-- not the authority of empire but the authority of scrappy, salty punks who know how to stay alive all winter in a tent. The authority of "little ones" faced with every stumbling block imaginable who just don't quit.