

"Getting Behind Jesus"

Matthew 16:21-28

August 28, 2011

11th Sunday After Pentecost

Poor Peter! You have to feel sorry for him sometimes. He is so quick to speak but sometimes what he has to say gets him into trouble. Just last week, Peter opened his mouth and correctly confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. That's good! Jesus praised him for that. In today's Gospel reading, Peter opens his mouth again, seemingly to try and protect Jesus from something bad, namely, suffering and death, but this time he's wrong. Jesus strongly rebukes him in no uncertain terms. Why? Peter seems to be doing something what we all try to do at one time or another: he is trying to tell Jesus what to do. And Peter's way – our way – is wrong.

Peter was right in identifying Jesus as the Christ – the Messiah. He truly believed that. But he failed to understand what the Messiah's mission was. Like many of the Jews of his day, Peter believed that the Messiah was coming to right all the wrongs in the life of Israel as a nation. The Messiah would come to bring political, military, and financial success to God's chosen people. If Jesus was going to go to Jerusalem, He surely would be going up in triumph to be received as Messiah. Would there be opposition to Jesus by the present regime in Jerusalem? Sure, but God would protect Jesus from that opposition and give Him victory over His enemies. Jesus would claim the throne of His father, King David, and establish an earthly kingdom that would last forever. And Peter and His fellow disciples will be there to share in the glory.

Surely, we have that same misconception about Jesus at times. We think that Jesus will make right all the wrongs that we have suffered as Christians. We think that He will establish a Christian America where morality will be better, churches will overflow with members and money, and all people, if we just do the right thing, will fall in line as His followers. Will there be opposition? Sure,

but God will protect us, His followers, from that opposition and give us victory over our enemies. We will be there to share in His glory.

But Jesus gives a very different picture of His work as Messiah. He says that He must go to Jerusalem to suffer, not succeed. He will be killed, not crowned as king. Jesus does say that, on the third day, He will be raised. However, by that time in His sermon, I'm sure the disciples' jaws have already dropped to the ground and they are not hearing that part of it.

Furthermore, Jesus does not see this outcome as a tragic mistake or an unfortunate destiny. Jesus says He *must* do this. It is necessary for Him to do this. This is the fulfillment of God's plan in sending Him into the world in the first place. His battle was not against injustice and the kingdoms of this world. It was much bigger than that. Jesus' battle was against sin and the kingdom of Satan in the spiritual realm.

There was only one way for Jesus to win and it was not by establishing an earthly kingdom and enjoying success in this life. Sin earns God's wrath and punishment. It results in death and consignment to hell. The only way to shield us from God's wrath was for Jesus to stand between the wrath of God and us. The only way to free us from the punishment we deserve because of our sin was for Jesus to take our sin upon Himself and endure the punishment which it deserved. The only way to keep us out of hell was for Jesus to undergo hell itself.

Jesus did that by going to the heart of His opposition in Jerusalem, allowing the suffering to take place, and allowing Himself to be killed. That and that alone would fulfill God's plan in dealing with sin. What seemed to be a failure – rejection, suffering, and death – would actually be the means for gaining the greatest success – life and salvation for the world – and it would demonstrated to be so by Jesus' being raised from death to life again by the Father. (This, of course, was missed by the disciples totally.)

It is no wonder that Peter rebuked Jesus. Jesus was not following his plan of success. Peter said to him, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." There was no room for this defeatist talk about suffering and death. God's way in the world and His reign as king should look like success. Peter and the rest of the disciples were poised to be Jesus' assistants in this new and successful kingdom they had dreamed up. They were going to 'get theirs' by following Jesus. They would have it easy. They would share in Jesus' success, His power, and His glory. They would be on top of the world.

As much as we would like to condemn Peter's brash statements, I think each of us would have said the same thing. Even though we know more about how Jesus' words were fulfilled than Peter did at the time, we still tend to think that Jesus is all about worldly success and that following Jesus is all about us – what we can get from it and how it can make our lives better. We measure the success of the Lord's mission among us by how many bodies are in the pew on a Sunday and how many dollars are in the offering plates. We expect that following Jesus means we will "get ours". Life should be easy as a Christian without conflict or opposition. It should never mean that we ever have to alter our priorities, our choices, or our lifestyles. We should be able to do as we want as Christians. Following Jesus is "all about us" and our wants and needs. It means we should always be happy, always be healthy, and always be happy wealthy as Christians.

To that kind of thinking – that Jesus should choose the easy way or that those who follow Him should expect the easy way – Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." This seems harsh – calling Peter "Satan" and all – but this is exactly the course of action that Satan was trying to encourage Jesus to take during his temptations in the desert. Use your power to make bread! Jump off the temple to attract a following! Compromise your integrity and gain the success of the world!

That way, while easy, more enjoyable, and in line with the world's definition of success leads not to life, but to death. The way of death – through rejection, through suffering, and through crucifixion – leads to new life that lasts forever. That's the path that Jesus took for us and for our salvation. Those who belong to Jesus and follow Him will, in fact, follow in this world the same path.

Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." The first and primary obstacle in following Jesus is not from the world around us. The obstacle is within. Discipleship is not about self indulgence or pleasing one's self. Our natural self is sinful and leads us away from Jesus. We tend to think and insist that God's way of dealing with the world and evil should conform to our way – a way of power and success. As disciples, we want to use that power over others, especially fellow disciples. We entangle ourselves in ambition, criticism of others, competition with others, and a spirit of "one-upmanship" in our interaction with others, even in the church.

Jesus says, "Deny yourself." The way of Jesus is one of humble obedience and submission to the will of God. As Jesus chose the way of service, obedience, and suffering for the sake of the world, He now calls each of us to deny the desire for power and, instead, choose the way of self-giving service to others and humble obedience to the will of God.

The second obstacle to discipleship is what Jesus calls "the cross". As the cross was the means of suffering that Jesus endured for being faithful to the will of the Lord, so also there will be "crosses" - various means of suffering – that we will be called on to endure when we are faithful to the will of the Lord. This doesn't refer to the general difficulties of life – illness, unexpected tragedies, natural disasters, and so on. This is suffering that comes to disciples because they are disciples of Christ – rejection, ridicule and even persecution. Rather than avoid such suffering by compromising our beliefs and changing our actions so that we "fit in" with the way of the world, we are to take up our cross – willingly experience suffering rather than be unfaithful to the Lord.

And so we are to follow Jesus wherever He leads us and in whatever situation He places us. Can we seek to follow Jesus and yet be self-indulgent and avoid suffering? We can but it won't work. It's like the young boy who was searching for some money he lost on a brightly lit street one night. Someone asked him, "Are you sure you lost the money here?" He said, "No, I lost it in the alley over in the other block, but the light is better here to look for it." Obviously, the young boy is not going to find the money if he doesn't search where the money is, but chooses to search for it in a nicer location. In the same way, we are not going to find life if we don't deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Jesus in the way to where life is, but choose to search for it in easier ways that are more pleasing to us and avoid conflict and suffering.

This seems rather difficult to do and we may despair of ever being able to do it. However, "Jesus' call has, within itself, the power to create and sustain the faithful response it desires. His Word enables his disciples to follow him wherever he goes." (Gibbs, p.844). His Word of washing in Holy Baptism chose us from the path of sin and death and put us on the way of righteousness and life. His Word of forgiveness in the absolution and preaching restores us to the way of righteousness and life whenever we stray from it. His Word in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, by the very body and blood of the one we follow – Jesus Christ - strengthens us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and faithful follow Him.

Therefore, to be in the Word here and in our homes is to follow Him. It cannot be neglected or seen as optional if we want to be able to follow the way that leads to everlasting life. With His Word read, studied, heard, and memorized we are on the path through suffering to life. Without His Word we may be on a more pleasant path, but it leads through pleasure to death.

If there is anything we can learn from Peter, it is to be careful about what you say. Too often we set our minds on the things of man, thinking they are the things of God. Suffering seems bad, but, in Jesus' case, it accomplishes the greatest good: forgiveness, life, and salvation for us. Indulging

ourselves, avoiding pain, and following our own path may seem good, but, in our case, they can cause great evil: separation from God, death, and hell. Jesus denied Himself, took up His cross (literally), and followed the will of His Father which was contrary to all reasonable expectations. Let us get behind Jesus and, contrary to all reasonable expectations of this world, deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Him all the way through the sufferings of this world to the everlasting joys of the world to come. Amen.