

Sermon for Sunday, August 31, 2008
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)
By Tim Ljunggren

First Lesson	Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm	Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c
Second Lesson	Romans 12:9-21
Gospel	Matthew 16:21-28

It seems as if Jesus can be so fickle at times, doesn't it? Last week, if you remember, he was extolling the virtues of Peter, who recognized Jesus for who he was: the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Why, Jesus even told Peter that Jesus' own church would be built on the foundation that Peter would provide.

What a heady experience for Peter...

Today is a different matter, however. Today, Jesus is still talking about the topic of identity, but he says something that totally shocks Peter and the rest of the disciples: "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Wow. What a statement!

Of course, the disciples just don't get it. Of course, Peter just doesn't get it: "And Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him, saying 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'"

Peter is just like the rest of us when we perceive things that we don't like—we try to change them. In this case, Peter takes Jesus aside in order to "set him straight." In Peter's mind, the death of Jesus would mean the death of identity—not only for Jesus, but for Peter and the rest of the disciples as well. Peter was hinging his entire identity—his entire life—on the well-being of Jesus; Jesus' words to him on that particular day was a literal shock to the system.

In essence, Peter was trying to conform Jesus to Peter's own wants and needs while totally ignoring the purpose for which Jesus was sent by God. In Peter's rebuke of Jesus, we find Peter's unwillingness to look beyond himself to the

greater picture that Jesus was trying to describe: after a horrible (and wrong) death, Jesus would rise again.

Peter seems to have missed that part of the discussion, and Jesus lets him know how displeased he is with the following words: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Wow. Poor Peter—he probably didn’t know what hit him.

Yet, Jesus doesn’t let up; he goes on by saying: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Priorities—Jesus is talking about priorities and the need for his disciples to choose the right ones.

Jesus tell us the very same thing this morning.

Here is the danger: the path to destruction that Jesus describes to Peter, the one where worldly concerns become more important than our heavenly concerns, does not begin with setting out to defy God and to identify with the world. No, the path to conformity, the path to worldliness, the path to spiritual destruction begins with small, seemingly harmless steps. We’re busy, we’re tired, we’re not ready for anything serious, we’re busy telling others (or talking about others behind their backs) how they should be running their lives. Eventually, such small steps and such rationalizations can close our hearts and our minds to being able to hear the word of God at all. We become self-important—we know what’s best for ourselves, for our church, and for others.

Just like Peter.

Here’s a simple test that you can administer to yourself to help you diagnose your own situation. Ask yourself each day, at some regular time, whether you have remembered in all your doings and all your plans and all your actions that you are a person who is certain to die.

Where does that leave you?

If I told you right now that you had only 30 minutes to live, how would you spend that time? In gossip? By berating others? By forgetting who you are by being so wrapped up in the trappings of this world? In that 30 minutes, would you forget to come to terms with the God who has given us all life?

That God comes to greet you in our worship this morning. God has come to the world in Emmanuel, God with us and for us in Jesus. God wants to interrupt us in the best sense of the word, not because God resents our lives and our projects, but because God intends to warn us from danger and keep us on the path to life. And God understands how strong the temptation to be conformed to the world is, to excuse ourselves and our bad behaviors with the thought that we are simply acting just like everyone else.

This morning you will receive the sacrament. And in that moment you will be bound into a different reality from the one that dominates our daily routine: the reality of Jesus who as he predicted walked the path of obedience and met his death on the cross. He did not deny that death. And yet, in the night in which he was betrayed, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to his friends, and to all who come after him. And when he rose from the dead he promised that he is with us always and everywhere, to the end of the age.

So here we are: what do we do? Do we deny Christ by allowing ourselves to be blinded to what we are supposed to be? Will we continue to be like Peter in today's Gospel lesson, pretending to know what's best? Or are we willing to live both in warning and in forgiving, in loving and in Christ's rebuking of us? In living and in dying, God comes to see that we do not lose our lives but find true life in the world restored to us through Jesus.

Can we do that? Will we do that?

Amen. ...

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