

Homily for Sunday, September 13, 2009

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 19)

By Tim Ljunggren

First Lesson **Proverbs 1:20-33**
Psalm **19**
Second Lesson **James 3:1-12**
Gospel **Mark 8:27-38**

“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’”

Harsh words.

Today, Jesus talks to us in harsh words.

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus is instructing his disciples—and us—about what is to come.

Humiliation.

Pain.

Torture.

Death.

How can we talk about the will of God in connection with all of this? How can we talk about the will of God in terms of suffering, rejection, and death? How can we even think of God’s will for the Messiah in these terms? Never mind speaking about it. How can we even think about the necessary death of the promised Christ.

Certainly, Peter didn’t want to think about it, did he? He challenged Jesus and Jesus’ harsh words. Peter cornered Jesus and told him how wrong he was—that the Messiah he and the rest of the disciples envisioned had nothing to do with suffering, rejection, and death.

What kind of Messiah would endure such things?

Jesus, of course, set Peter straight. Peter's mistake was to put all of his hope in an earthly king—a warrior Messiah that would save Israel from itself and its Roman oppressors. Peter was looking for someone who fulfilled his fantasies of a perfect king and a perfect Messiah.

And Peter was dead wrong.

Just as he did with Peter, Jesus commands our silence this morning—and that silence hangs like a casket suspended about an open grave waiting to let go, waiting to be covered and forgotten.

We compose epitaphs: The man from Nazareth. Great Teacher. Friend of Sinners. Carpenter's Son. Son of Mary.

Does any of this really matter?

He must suffer, die, and be raised on the third day. Anything else is like a eulogy spoken by a stranger over a stranger's grave; a pretense, a pointless drama enacted for the sake of form.

There is nothing new here this morning. Nor is there anything particularly exciting. In fact, the harsh words that Jesus utters to his companions are words we hear everyday: Humiliation, pain, suffering, and death. We hear them on our satellite radios, or we see them acted out on our television screens. We have become immune to their meaning, and we have become immune to our response to them.

Jesus is not telling us something that we don't already know, is he?

Living into Jesus' harsh words takes work. There can be no denying that taking up our cross is hard work, harsh work, work that must be done, yet we wish it could be someone else doing the dirty work. Christ speaks the truth when he makes a connection between the work of the cross and the denial of self. Peter speaks for all of us when he expresses horror and disbelief about what true sacrifice really is. We flee from the horror of the cross, we hide the cross, and we escape to our many words about it, to our preachings of concern, liberation, and inclusivity. We run to the enhancement of ourselves in a very weary world—we want to walk on water, yet we refuse to get wet. We want the honor of the cross, yet there are no nails that pierce our skin.

“Get behind me, Satan...”

Jesus demands silence from us this morning. A harsh silence that follows his harsh words. Yet, behind those harsh words, gleaming in the distance, is the radiant love of God.

Be still. Be silent. Let the radiance wash over you.

Amen. ...