

Pentecost 16, Proper 17A  
August 31, 2008

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

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Last Sunday Peter and Jesus had a lovely moment, when, in our gospel reading, we heard Peter declare his faith that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. And Jesus, hearing the faith and trust he had been looking for in his followers, answered, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

Well, that was only a few verses ago. And now, in his typically human way, Peter falters. He seems to forget that the Son of the Living God will know precisely what is the right thing to say, that Jesus will not make idle remarks without thinking them through. He certainly forgets how to be a rock of any kind.

Peter, with characteristic clumsiness, tries to talk Jesus out of the vitally important words he has just uttered to his disciples. “I will suffer and die,” Jesus says, “and on the third day be raised.” “God forbid it, Lord!” shouts Peter. “This must never happen to you.” No rock here. He’s back to being plain old human Peter.

But in Peter’s defense, nobody likes bad news. I can tell you that personally, as someone who recently delivered some myself. No one likes receiving news that is unexpected and unwelcome.

Some of you told me you didn’t want to hear the news that I would be leaving All Saints, but followed that statement quickly with kind words, wishing me well, understanding words about my need to go back home at this point in my life both as a priest and as a wife, mother, and grandmother.

I thank you so much for your good wishes. I’m grateful for that reaction from you because I have loved being your priest here for these 8 years. It has been so rewarding for me to see you grow and thrive and enjoy each other and minister in so many ways to the needs of the community within and without.

It has been a great blessing for me to pray with you, to learn with you, to baptize and marry some of you, to preside at the burial office for so many whom we have loved together, and to stand at the Lord’s table with you and serve you the bread which is Christ’s body.

I want you to know that I understand your reaction to my news and in fact I’m very grateful for it. I take it as a sign that you care for me, and I want you to know how much I care for you.

But we have left Peter at odds with his Lord. And I have no wish to draw a parallel between my bad news and the bad news Jesus delivered to his disciples. That would be foolish. There is no comparison. Let’s just say that I understand how difficult it is to receive – and to deliver – bad news.

Doesn’t Jesus understand this, too? Why is he so hard on Peter for pushing back? Well, I’m glad you asked!

Peter must have been shocked to have Jesus call him Satan. It seems too harsh. But that name, Satan, should take us back to the temptation Jesus endured in the wilderness at the hands of Satan just after his baptism, right at the beginning of his ministry on earth.

Satan tempted Jesus three times then, trying to get him to use the power he knew he had (God had just spoken to him as he rose up out of the waters of baptism – “This is my Son, my beloved. In him I am well pleased.”).

Satan could not get him to make bread for himself, though he was famished, or to consent to use his power to rule the world, or to force God to protect him from falling from a great height. Satan was unsuccessful at tempting him, but in Jesus’ eyes Satan has now returned in his own precious disciple, Peter, and is tempting him again to avoid the difficult path that lies before him.

One thing we know about Satan is that his appearance in the wilderness was not once for all. Rather, temptation returns again and again at the most trying times. And so Peter the rock becomes a stone to stumble over.

It’s Peter’s earthly thinking that has enabled this satanic appearance. And Jesus’ criticism of him is that he is “setting his mind not on divine things but on human things.”

This is the comment I’d like to dwell on a little this morning. Setting his mind – our minds - on divine things rather than human things. How do we do this?

Peter reacts based on his own experience, his own sense of right and wrong. His is a reasonable response in terms of his own life and the lives of his friends, in terms of how he sees success and failure in the world. Jesus should not have to die! And I think we are right there with Peter, when we reason about human things.

There sure are a lot of human things out there to concern us. And if you’re anything like me, it’s the thing right in front of your face that gets the most attention.

For me right now one of the biggest human concerns is the necessity of saying goodbye to dear friends. Another one is waiting one more week – maybe – for our second grandchild to be born. What human concerns are on the front burner for you?

Do they involve a relationship with a member of your family or a friend? Preparing to start something new and unknown as a new year begins? I know that the Vestry and officers of this parish are concerned about the leadership they will need to provide during the search for a new rector. Human things.

For all of us there are economic concerns, for some more than others, as the cost of food and housing and transportation and education and health care continue to rise out of our control. Will there be work to sustain us and our families, or retirement funds, health insurance? What if we face serious illness? How will we provide for our old age? How will we do the best we can for our children, now and in the future?

On this Labor Day weekend, when we remember all who work in jobs that benefit all of us, day and night, we must also remember those who would love to be working but can't find a suitable job.

As the third anniversary of the devastating hurricane Katrina and the resulting floods was marked a few days ago, we know, too, that there are many whose human concern is still rebuilding, restarting. And even as we speak there is the threat of another storm – Hurricane Gustav and possibly another one behind him, Hanna – bearing down on the same Gulf coast region.

Surely, Jesus is not suggesting that we should not be concerned about all of these human things! They are a part of our lives and it would be irresponsible of us NOT to be concerned about them.

But I believe Jesus is saying to us that when we place our concern ONLY on the human things what we learn first is that most of them are out of our control. And that knowledge leads quickly to hopelessness and despair. But applying divine things to our concerns about earthly, human things can give us fresh insight.

I believe, for example, that the coming national election could have a major effect on the human concerns I've just mentioned. I believe there is the promise of real help for people in this country. I have, and I think you have, a huge stake in the outcome. But that outcome, apart from my exercising my right to vote, is really out of my control. And if it doesn't turn out as I think it should, if the news on November 5<sup>th</sup> constitutes bad news, I will need to remember again that ultimately it is not earthly concerns or earthly powers that govern my life.

Faith in Jesus Christ means trusting that Jesus transforms bad news, even if I can't see how. Jesus, who makes all things new, transforms our bad news.

He delivers the bad news of his impending death to Peter and the others in this morning's gospel, knowing they won't understand it yet, but will only be able to comprehend it later, after his resurrection. And his resurrection is the glorious good news, the liberating, fabulous news, the saving news of Jesus' life on earth.

They didn't see it coming. We don't know what's coming. All we do know is that Jesus is able to take our human worries and transform them.

That's why we bring to him all of the human concerns that look like bad news to us and pray that he will transform them and us into new life.

The habit of doing just that, of regular worship in which we bring our faults and our worries and our shortcomings to Christ at the holy table where he offers himself to us, is something of what Jesus means when he says "those who lose their life for my sake will find it." At least it's a beginning. It starts with setting our minds on divine things, rather than only on human things.

Moses. We read about his birth a week ago and today this story of his early adulthood.

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You don't suppose he expected to hear God's voice in that bush, do you? But he stopped, and he gave that bush his attention. And he noticed it was burning, but not burning up.

On the whole it was a disturbing encounter. God's commands out of the bush sounded like really bad news to him. "Who am I to go to Pharaoh," he cried. But we know the rest of the story. God transformed Moses, gave him skills and courage he didn't have before, used him to save the people of Israel and deliver them out of Egypt.

God can do great things with us and for us when we turn and give our attention to divine things.

What's the rest of the story of All Saints, Parma? I don't know. I just know it's going to be good. Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria