

16th Week after Pentecost, Proper 17 – Year A – September 3, 2008
Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28
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So you wanna be? Go ahead and fill in the blank. For youngsters it often seems to be something like so you wanna be a rock star, sports legend, or fashion diva. We all have a wanna be story in our lives, just by virtue of once being much younger than we are now. Hear the question again, “so what do you want to be when you grow up?” There was a time in grade school when I wanted to be an airhostess – I guess they are called flight attendants now. It sounded like an exciting job to me because of the all the interesting places I would get to fly to. I still love to travel, even though my life turned out rather differently! I went to high school with Janet who told everyone who asked that she wanted to be a nun. She was a Christian, but not a Roman Catholic, and I was never quite sure if she was being serious or if she was just fed up of people asking her what she wanted to be, as if it was vital that she “be” someone other than the beautiful person God created her to be.

I think my friend Janet was rather counter-cultural and the older I get the more I appreciate her interesting view of things. As young as she was, I think she understood what Jesus meant by denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him. In last week’s Gospel reading, we heard Peter’s magnificent declaration of Jesus as the Messiah and son of the living God. In tonight’s reading from Matthew, we have the continuation of that conversation with Jesus. Now all of sudden Jesus is giving Peter a good dressing down and calling him Satan. It makes Jesus sound kind of capricious and flaky – one minute offering blessings, the next sharp rebukes. Jesus knew of course, that some soft and comforting words would not make it through to Peter’s heart. He needed to be as radically straightforward with Peter, as He is with you and with me in order for us all to get the point. Peter knows that Jesus is the Messiah. However, it is like watching over an artist’s shoulder as they sketch an outline for a portrait. The sketch has no depth or real perspective, no color or tone, and no texture. Proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah is like that artist’s outline. Until we have all the lines filled in and the full background and color scheme, with the rich textures of the portrait, we can’t fully appreciate the Master’s work. Peter has just heard about how that sketch of Jesus as Messiah is going to be filled with a lot of pain, betrayal and suffering. Still reeling from the first part of Jesus’ passion prediction, Peter may have missed the key words “and on the third day be raised.”

Whether or not Peter realizes it, he is horrified for himself as well as scandalized that the Messiah will undergo such terrible humiliation and murder. Jesus is just as scandalized that Peter doesn’t get it. This *is* Jesus’ way. This is the way for all of Jesus’ followers and more. Suffering is actually a human reality – whether we are Christian or not. Suffering is the effluent of humanity’s sin that flows freely, and the stream in which every person bathes at some time or another. Even Jesus by virtue of His humanity suffers. Yet His suffering is for the redemption of all humanity.

We have to look to the end of this passage now to understand that there is a light at the end of the tunnel of suffering and it is called the kingdom of God. The kingdom has already begun; death and slavery to sin were conquered by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet you and I have a unique opportunity to stand in the kingdom of God as witnesses to the world. Despite the muck and mire, you and I are filled with God’s grace and fortitude to bear all things with patience, sharing the gift of our hope in Christ. God’s kingdom light is a blazing beacon drawing us onward to our true home, where there is redemption and healing for all. It is especially the promise of eternal life for all who know and love Jesus and who are clothed in His righteousness. There is also another promise made by Jesus in this passage. There is no profit to anyone in gaining the world, if it means that we forfeit our souls.

Between Peter's sketchy portrait of the Messiah, Jesus' startling revelation of his passion and resurrection, and the divine purpose that Jesus' life and death serves in the larger scheme of things as the savior and redeemer of all, we have the texture and color of a disciple's life in Christ. If you ever spent time with a school or other career counselor then this will seem familiar. The conversation might sound something like this, "So you wanna be a disciple of Jesus. Well, here's what you need to do." Here are the three steps to achieving your goal: deny yourself; take up your cross; and follow. For many of us, step one might take up a considerable portion of our earthly lives. This isn't about self-denial in the sense of feeling guilty because we happened to be born into an affluent society, have a home, clothes, and food. Nor is it self-denial in the sense of living a harsh, ascetic lifestyle, except by discerning God's call to that vocation. This is about a daily, or for some of us, even a moment by moment surrendering of our will to God's will. This is our gift to God, being willing to serve God as you and I are uniquely gifted and called to do. And so self-denial is more about a willingness to give up or set aside our own selfish ends in favor of God's desire for our lives.

In the Roman kingdom, where crucifixion was reserved for the worst criminals and those convicted of sedition against the Emperor or Rome, the cross is the ultimate symbol of shame and humiliation. In vivid contrast to *that* world of abusive power and violence, stands God's kingdom. In God's kingdom, the cross is a sign of Jesus' victory over sin and death. It is God's triumphant response to the powers of the worldly kingdom of Rome. As children of God's kingdom, taking up our cross each day is a mark of our faith and trust in God. Taking up our cross is a mark of our love for Jesus, and our confident hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to fulfill the promises of God.

And so we follow Christ our Lord, and what we gain cannot be measured. Jesus has the words of eternal life. Following in Jesus' footsteps is following the path of life. In the eyes of the world, the picture we paint as Christians following the path of our Lord is positively outrageous, ludicrous even, and goes entirely against the cultural grain. In God's eyes, it is a dynamic portrait of abundant life. Each brush stroke painted with the amazing love and care of our Creator. Each color is more vibrant than anything made by human hands. As living portraits of the Christian life of self-denial and service, you and I are imbued with the richness of God's perspective. Every picture of a Christian life is ultimately in the shape of that scandalous cross, so offensive to the world's eyes, and so beautiful to God's.

Amen.