

13th Sunday after Pentecost

Emmanuel Episcopal Church

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Exodus 3: 1-15; Matthew 16: 21-28

Last week's gospel surely represents one of the high points in the disciple Peter's life. When Jesus asks all the disciples "Who do you say that I am?" (first asking them "Who do others say that I am?") Peter, like the smartest and most eager student in the class, gives his answer even without raising his hand: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And his reward is Jesus' approval: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will found my church!" As Riika and Steve noted last week, this is the question each of us must answer: who do I say Jesus is? Peter knows – Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God – and when he gives that answer, the issue seems to be closed. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Period. No questions or doubts. And Jesus agrees that Peter has aced it! A plus!

But what happens in this week's gospel, which follows immediately upon last week's, shows that it is more complicated than that and that Peter's answer, while not wrong, is at best limited. Today's gospel tells us that Jesus' teachings begin to take on a darker, a more somber, coloring. He begins to teach his followers 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." This is surely not the message the disciples expect or want to hear. What they expect, what they desperately want, is

freedom from the Roman oppressors, independence for Israel, a return to the glorious days of King David and King Solomon. Or if not specifically political in nature, they expect a “Kingdom of Heaven” to be instituted and the Messiah to be triumphant in bringing that about. But Jesus is telling them now that the very spiritual leaders of Israel – the elders, the chief priests, the rabbis - who should be cheering him on as he leads them to victory, these leaders will cause him to suffer, and he will die and then, he adds, be raised after 3 days.

Peter here certainly speaks for the other disciples when he pulls Jesus aside and tells him “God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you.” And then Jesus, who had praised his best student and declared him to be a Rock, rebukes him in the most cutting of terms: “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.” What a terrible judgment for Peter to hear. If we identify at all with Peter – and I admit I do – our sympathy for him at this point is so intense that we can feel him recoil as if he has been slapped. Matthew’s gospel says that Peter had pulled Jesus aside, and I like to think that Jesus gives this rebuke to Peter in such a way that only Peter hears it. It would be too cruel for Peter to be reprimanded in front of his friends and colleagues whose good opinion he so obviously desires. But even if the reprimand is private, it is truly a reversal of what Jesus very recently told him: the rock begins to crumble.

Jesus then turns to the other disciples and tells them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross, and follow me.” This is plain speaking. It is not going to be easy to be a follower of this man. The metaphor he

uses to describe what they must do is “take up their cross” but for Him of course it is not a metaphor. He is beginning to fill in the grim details of just what he means by “great suffering.” And then he makes it even more pointed: they must lose their lives in order to find their lives. Even if they gain the whole world, they will not find their lives. They must learn, as Peter must learn, to put their minds on divine things, not human things.

If we pause here and ask ourselves what has happened and what lessons we should take from this strange and disturbing turn of events, we can say, first, that by naming Jesus “Messiah” and even “Son of God,” Peter has taken a step towards understanding Jesus, but real understanding is still to come. Peter can call Jesus “Messiah” and “Son of God,” but naming is not the same as knowing, deep-down knowing. Names are verbal signs we give to things and persons to allow us to communicate with ourselves and others. “This is my wife” or “This is my friend”: statements like these are essential as we navigate our lives, as we communicate with others, but they are not the same as the lifelong experience of being a husband or being a friend. Peter, like all of us, is on a spiritual journey, and he is learning that his particular journey is going to require him to get out of the way with his preconceptions and let Jesus reveal God’s plans for both of them.

I said that I identify with Peter. In fact, I admit to being like Peter. I want God to be what I want God to be. When I say, “I believe in God,” I am tempted to impose on God my own understanding, my own interests and desires and biases. I assume that when I express my will, God will accept it as His will. This is the function of my ego, my concern for myself and my own interests. But God is not my ego, and I have to learn

over and over again to hear God's revelations of himself, and doing that requires humility and a listening heart and love.

The story of Moses's encounter with God in the Exodus story today reveals something similar about the human encounter with the divine. God who appears to Moses has an identity, the identity embedded in Jewish tradition: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (One hears echoes of this kind of identity in Peter's statement, "You are the Messiah. You are the Son of God," terms common to the tradition out of which Peter speaks.) But when God hands Moses a mandate that will shake his life to the foundations, Moses wants to know more: "But who are you? What is your name?" And to that question, God says merely, "I am who I am." Just "I am." Just "Is." It is almost as if God is not noun but verb. "I have manifested myself," God seems to say, "I have incarnated myself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but to go deeper than that is to encounter a mystery that cannot be named and can only be known by faith that is willing not to require a name." There is a wonderful paradox here. By not being named, God calls Moses not into knowledge about Him – the kind of knowledge that names bestow - but into relationship with him. And through that relationship a nation will be led out of slavery into freedom.

I think the same is true of Peter's friendship with Jesus. Peter's spiritual growth is one of the great stories of the New Testament. What we see in this episode is that Peter's knowledge of who Jesus is is limited to Peter's knowledge of names. He has reached a satisfactory point in his relationship with Jesus and he wants to stop there. He can name Jesus "Messiah" and "Son of God" and that is an essential starting point in

his experience of Jesus as incarnation of the divine, but it is only a starting point, and Peter assumes that having the names gives him full understanding. So when Jesus reveals his own awareness that he must suffer and die and rise again, Peter protests because that vision of the future contradicts his understanding of who Jesus is. A Messiah who suffers? A Son of God who dies? From Peter's perspective at this point, that is a contradiction, an obscene impossibility. So his commitment to his own understanding of Jesus, of God's will in the world, deludes him and puts him in opposition to Jesus and to God. That is why Jesus tells him he is a stumbling block. (I imagine that in His humanity Jesus himself is struggling, coming to terms with his own understanding of his destiny. To have his disciple protest in the way Peter does is in fact an impediment to Jesus' growing awareness of what His life means and where His destiny is leading him. This is so even though Peter obviously thinks he is defending Jesus, maybe protecting Jesus from some illusion He has created for Himself.)

What Jesus says to his disciples here is what Peter needs to hear, as do we. We must lose our lives in order to find our lives. This has many implications, perhaps as many implications as there are people who hear it. But central to what Jesus is saying is that we must be willing to give up our false understandings, our self-oriented false truths, if we are going to live the lives God desires for us. To lose our lives in this sense is to give up what Thomas Merton calls our "false selves" – our ego-based assumptions that we are separate from everyone and everything – and discover our true selves, which allow us to see that we are one with God and with one another.

The prayer ascribed to St. Francis, “Make me an Instrument of Thy Peace,” ends this way: “It is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” The point is that we do not have to wait for our physical deaths for that to happen: eternal life as Jesus lives it and as St. Francis describes it, is available here and now. In the Gospel of John, as Jesus prepares to die physically, he thanks God for giving eternal life to his followers and he adds “And this is eternal life: that they may know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” We just have to let die our selfish wishes, fears, and desires. Of course, that is what the spiritual journey is all about and we have to do it – experience death and resurrection – again and again.

It is hard to find the words to say this but I have learned it to be true: it is by letting go of our concepts, our definitions, of God that we find God, or that we let God find us. This is what the 13th century mystic Meister Eckhart means when he prays, “Oh God, save me from God.”

Peter recovers from the reprimand Jesus gives him here. He continues to follow Jesus and he continues to blunder until the lowest point of his life when on the night before the crucifixion he denies that he knows Jesus. That is Peter’s traumatic moment, the point at which he realizes in his mind and heart and soul that his false self must die: his ego that placed his own safety above loyalty to the most important person in his life. Out of that betrayal arises a new Peter, and when we see him in the Book of Acts living out his life it is as a new man. It is Peter who preaches the 1st sermon on Pentecost, who heals the lame man in the temple, and who is sent by God to the home of the gentile

Cornelius to discover that God is the God of all, Jew and Gentile, the God of inclusion not separation.

At the end of the Gospel of John, the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples and as he had done before, he asks a question, this time specifically to Peter. In fact, he asks it three times, the same number of times Peter had denied him. The question is not “Who do you say that I am?” Instead, it is “Do you love me?” In that question is the answer to how we are to know God: it is through loving and being loved. And when Peter answers each time, “Yes Lord I love you,” Jesus responds, “Feed my sheep.” Do not let them go hungry; do not let them be homeless; do not let them be betrayed by those who would do them harm and tell them lies and exploit their weaknesses. Feed them.

I think this is what Peter learns about himself, about Jesus, and about their relationship. It is not knowledge, it is not ideas expressed in words, that matter, ultimately. Knowing – our beliefs and our creeds and our categories – knowing is important but not essential. What is essential in our relationship with God is not knowledge but love. Earlier in the service, when we prayed together the General Confession, we did not confess to false ideas about God. We did not admit we have an incomplete understanding and hold incorrect concepts about God. We confessed that we have not loved God with our whole heart. We confessed that we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. And we said we are sorry and we humbly repent.

We should pray to hear Christ question us as he did Peter, “Do you love me?”
“Yes Lord,” we will say. And He will say to us, “Feed my sheep. This is how you know
me.” Amen.