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8/31/2014, Pentecost 12A
Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28
Denying Oneself

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Recently I have been thinking about this autumn's Monday Evening Bible Class. Our last Bible Class was on the Psalms. I think it took us three or four years to work our way through all 150 Psalms. And I wish we could start all over again on those Psalms. I think there is more to be learned and that it would be good for our souls to study those Psalms again. But the rest of the Bible is also wonderful and it beckons to us. So, I favor moving on. This fall, I suggest that we study the Gospel of St. Mark. I think that it will be good preparation for this coming liturgical year – what is called “Year B.” Year B is the one that concentrates on St. Mark.

If we can look at the first verse of Mark with fresh eyes, I think we will see that it is surprising and teeming with interest. Imagine that you are a great adventurer. You have been exploring some deep cave in Syria and you have found something called “The Gospel according to St. Mark.” But also suppose that you have never heard the Gospel before. Imagine that you know something of the literature and stories of the world, but that you have never heard tell of the gospel concerning Jesus Christ. Indeed, suppose no one had. Suppose this is entirely fresh material.

So, you read the first sentence. It goes this way:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, *the Son of God*.
(Mark 1:1, RSV)

The sentence starts off okay. Apparently this is a story about someone named “Jesus Christ.” But then you read the final phrase: “the Son of God.” Suddenly you realize that you have stumbled upon the most important subject of all. This is not a mere story about a man named Jesus. It is also a story about God! It is a story about the summit of human interest. It is a story compared to which all other stories become less important. Indeed, it is a story that promises to place everything else into proper perspective.

But the thing is, we all have some built-in notions about God. It is natural for us to think of God as being strong and triumphant. So, this explorer in the Syrian cave, as he sits down to read his newfound book, probably expects to be reading a story about someone strong and triumphant. He figures that he will be reading a story of glory and adventure. Imagine it! God – with all his strength and wisdom – comes to earth! Who can resist him? Evildoers at last are going to get their comeuppance. The innocent are going to be able to live in peace.

But as you read the Gospel according to St. Mark, you find a very different kind of story — especially in Mark, which is such a very lean and spare gospel focused on the cross of Christ. This Jesus is not strong, nor glorious. The response of the crowds to him is variable, starting off with adoration of him, but drifting toward incomprehension and rejection, and finally his death on a cross. The innocent do not flourish. Indeed, he *is* the Innocent One, but he ends up dead. Strange story!

PETER

So it is with Peter in today's Gospel Lesson. It is as if Peter is hearing the real story of Jesus for the first time. He has walked with Jesus, talked with Jesus, and even confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God:

And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Matthew 16:16, KJV)

Peter thinks that he knows Jesus quite well. But what he hears now, he does not like!

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16:21, RSV)

This saying of Jesus stuns Peter. He has confessed Jesus as the Son of the living God. How can such a Son suffer such a cruel ending? And what of those who follow him? What is to become of them? So Peter is offended by this strange story and cries out against it:

²²And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." (Matthew 16:22, RSV)

Then he who was one of the first to be summoned to Jesus is among the first to be sent away:

²³But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men." (Matthew 16:23, RSV)

And he who was supposed to be the rock of the church is declared to be a great hindrance to the church.

I KNOW NOT THE MAN!

Ten chapters down the road, in Matthew 26, Peter will continue his opposition to the cross by cursing and swearing ignorance of Jesus. He will disassociate himself from the man. A maid will question him, fear will overtake him, and he will renounce his Master:

And again he denied with an oath, *I do not know the man.*
(Matthew 26:72, KJV)

Now, in today's Gospel story, Jesus asks us to take this same formula, turn it around, and aim it at ourselves. Jesus asks us to deny, not him, but ourselves:¹

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny *himself* and take up his cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24, RSV)

It is as if for each of us, there is a master who from of old we have been serving. We have been loyal to this master. We have been true blue servants of this master. I mean, ourselves! We have served ourselves for ever so long. Now, Jesus says, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me." In this way, Jesus urges upon us a remarkable shift of loyalties.

Peter seems to sense it and to object to it. From Peter's point of view, if Jesus goes down, then we will end up going down too. And Jesus looks Peter straight in the eyes and says, "You are right, Peter. You have made a true estimate of things. If you would follow me, then prepare to die. Take up your cross and follow me."

Who would yield to such preaching? It seems so implausible. Yet, in the end, even Peter surrenders himself to this call, and sure enough, he dies. Indeed, according to tradition, he too dies on a cross, like his Lord.

Why? Why would Peter, who objects so much to our Lord's talk of a cross, in the end take up his own cross and follow Jesus? I think there are two reasons. First, it is the way of love to follow the beloved through thick and thin. Peter loved Jesus and his love was not easily scattered to the wind. In the end, Peter followed Jesus because he loved Jesus whether or not it was easy to do so.

The other reason could have been this: that our Lord's very next sentence after the one about the cross had a ring of truth about it for Peter. It is a verse about finding a new life:

²⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:25, RSV)

¹ Rf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 2, p. 539.

This second reason is akin to the first one: It is the one who loves most completely who loses himself, loses herself, but in the process finds a new life. So it was with Peter. He loved Jesus, by fits and starts he took up his cross and followed Jesus, and along the way, he found new life, both in this world and in the world to come. And he seems never to have regretted the exchange.

ST. PAUL

The coordination between today's Gospel Lesson about following Jesus and today's Epistle Lesson is really quite lovely. It is as if our Epistle Lesson teaches us in plain, practical ways how to go about denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus. St. Paul seems to feel that the following ideals are not beyond us:

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all... ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9-21, RSV)

In exhortation after exhortation, phrase after phrase, St. Paul imagines that it is possible for us to say to ourselves, "I know not the man, I know not the woman," and go ahead and do that which is counter-intuitive.

Consider the apostle's last rule, for example:

²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
(Romans 12:21, RSV)

This is an excellent description of what Jesus did: he did not permit himself to be overcome by evil, especially the evil of revenge. He was cursed, but cursed not in return. Or rather, he blessed, saying "Father, forgive..." He did not summon the twelve legions of angels to protect him, nor to overthrow the world. Rather, he

overcame evil with good. He defeated sin, not by destroying the sinner, but by taking the sin upon himself and dying that the sinner might live.

His love was genuine. He never denied Peter, he never wilted before the questions of a maid, he never turned out any poor sinner who came to him.

As far as lay possible with him, he lived peaceably with all. Indeed, when Jesus came to town, or Jesus came to a home, that place had a chance to be better than ever. Some people come to town, and things go downhill, because they bring strife or crime or a new spirit of discourtesy with them. But Jesus brings hope and healing and a breath of fresh air wherever he goes.

St. Paul imagines that we can do similar things. We need not go searching for a cross. One will find us, sure enough, if we are trying to stick close to Jesus. Old impulses of anger, revenge, lust, greed, and the whole sorry lot of vices that afflict us ... all of these mad voices will cry out to us and haunt us in this earthly life, they all remain. But the apostle imagines that we can deny them, take up our cross, and follow him.

Indeed, we can live in this world as if we are journeying on toward another one — toward a world centered on Jesus and on his ways. And in the process, perhaps we can help make this present world a better one and draw some others to go along with us in our pilgrimage toward Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.