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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, April 10, 2024
Matthew 17:22-27

HOLY GOSPELMatthew 17:22-27, RSV
Last week we read of our Lord's Transfiguration and the healing of the epileptic boy. No we read of Jesus again foretelling his death and resurrection. Also we read of the temple tax.

²²As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men, ²³and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were greatly distressed.

²⁴When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the half-shekel tax went up to Peter and said, "Does not your teacher pay the tax?" ²⁵He said, "Yes." And when he came home, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their sons or from others?" ²⁶And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. ²⁷However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook, and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel; take that and give it to them for me and for yourself."

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What should one do when he or she must confront hard reality — indeed, face up to some of the worst of news? Judging by our Gospel Lesson, I conclude that we should pick ourselves up and pay our taxes!

So, it is the *transition* between the first part of our Bible reading and the second part that particularly interests me in this sermon.

In the first part of our reading, Jesus repeats his Passion prediction from the preceding Chapter — Chapter 16. It is hard news. It speaks of the resurrection, yes, but till then it speaks of hard news — indeed, among the worst of news:

Jesus said to them, "The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men, ²³and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." (Matthew 17:22-23, RSV)

Our text says that the disciples were "greatly distressed" by this news. And I bet there were! Yet they venture no comment. Peter had tried that back in Chapter 16, declaring that this must not happen to Jesus. For his attempt to overrule Jesus, Peter had earned a stern rebuke. Jesus to him:

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)

So, even forward Peter has learned his lesson. The disciples might be very distressed to hear Jesus speak again of his coming death, but the Bible records no comment from them. So, the story simply moves on.

And I guess that is my point. The story needs to move on — both the Gospel story and our own story. When we suffer a blow in life and must face up to bad news, nonetheless, there is work to be done going forward. It is as Jesus said in John Chapter 9:

I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work. (John 9:4, KJV)

In our Bible reading, it so happened that the work that needed to be done next was to pay the tax. This was not a government tax. It was not a tax of the Roman Empire, but rather a temple offering. The tax goes back to the early days of Israel. We read of it in Exodus 30. The King James Version calls the tax a “ransom for his soul” (Exodus 30:12). Moses specified that the tax was to be half a shekel.

¹⁵The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half shekel, when you give the LORD’s offering to make atonement for yourselves. (Exodus 30:15, RSV)

So, when Jesus tells Peter to go fishing for the tax, the fish’s mouth contains a shekel — enough for both Jesus and Peter.

What are the odds? What are the chances that the fisherman would hook that particular fish — the one with a shekel in his mouth? Well, with God all things are possible. Jesus had already demonstrated his command of wind and wave back in Chapter 8 when he had stilled the storm on the sea. Now, he continues his command of the wild sea and the free-flowing fish. He commands that fish to hold a shekel in its mouth and to be caught by the fisherman. For Jesus, this is no problem.

Nor would it have been a problem to have overthrown Pontius Pilate and the whole Roman Empire. Jesus could have escaped crucifixion. But, then, where would we be? We would be lost. And the love of God is such that he did not want us to be lost.

So, in our reading Jesus speaks of his coming death, but then moves on to the work that lies at hand that day. It was the practical work of paying the tax. That is part of the pattern of Jesus that we should follow. Even when we

receive terrible news, so that our heart sinks, still, so long as we are still breathing and still kicking, we should try to walk with Jesus that day and do what needs to be done.

I have told this story before. It is a story about one of the saints of our congregation — Sister Eleanor Brunngraber, of blessed memory. She was a person of prayer. She had been a brilliant scientist. I have a copy of one of her articles in *The Journal of Biological Chemistry*. But in middle age, she gave up her work in science and became a person of prayer. She spent her days in prayer for our congregation and for the world. She lived next door, in our basement apartment. She helped Parish Secretary Karen Rombey with our newsletters and worship folders.

When she was dying, I visited her in the hospital to bring her the Holy Communion. I felt so bad for her, because she was so weak, that I suggested that she did not have to continue in her prayers... that God would understand. She answered, "Oh, no, Pastor. God loves the prayers of the weak, and so I mean to continue my prayers."

Sr. Eleanor was facing the worst of news. She was dying. But as long as she still had breath, she figured she had work to do and she meant to do it. This follows the pattern of Jesus.

So, what does a Christian do when confronting terrible blows in life? Well, as far as lies possible with us, we get up and pay our taxes, or whatever practical work lies at hand that fits with our desire to continue walking with Jesus. We follow the pattern of the One who worked while it was still day, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.