

Proper 17 Year A: 2 / 3 September 2017

St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

The Rev. Gary Cyr, Rector

**Take up your cross  
and follow Jesus in thankfulness**

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

One of the theologians who has had the greatest influence upon me is the late Russian Orthodox priest Alexander Schmemmann. In his seminal work, *For the Life of the World*, he postulates that the definition of humanity is one where “[humankind] is the priest. [Humankind] stands in the center of the world and unifies it in [humanity’s] act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God – and by filling the world with this eucharist, [humankind] transforms [humanity’s] life, the one that [humankind] receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with [God]”. Schmemmann argues that humanity receives the world as a gift from God, a blessing from our Creator, and humanity’s act of blessing God, in offering to God all that God has blessed us with, is to be in communion with God. In other words, our offering blessing to God on behalf of all creation is Eucharistic, a Greek word that means thanksgiving. That is the ideal of right-relatedness, of being in right relationship with God and creation. But, humanity sinned.

Our sin, according to Schmemmann, is not that humanity disobeyed God, but that we no longer see God as the source of blessing. Instead, humanity has displaced God with its own sense of self. When this occurs, creation is no longer seen as being in partnership with humanity, in communion, but rather as something humanity can dominate and misuse, going so far as to exploit nature as well as other humans. When humanity becomes the center of life, it distorts God’s intention and purpose of living as a Eucharistic community. If this premise is true, one might then argue that humanity’s ego-self has taken the place of God.

Sigmund Freud, one of the fathers of analytical psychology, gave us this notion of the ego, which polices between the pleasure seeking, immediate gratification drive of the id (our passions) and the more expectation orientated, rule based super-ego (our judgmentalism). The ego is meant to apply reason and logic to navigate between the id and super-ego. However, if unchecked by the other two, the ego can give one a sense of an over-inflated self. Think of all the “self” identifiers we have in our present culture: self-importance, -made, -sufficient, -reliant, -supporting, etcetera, etcetera. It is therefore reasonable to say that Schmemmann is correct in that humanity has displaced God as the source of all blessing with that of the ‘self.’

In last week’s homily, I mentioned that Peter was the mirror that each of us had to look into. Today’s gospel reading is a continuation of last week’s story, and Peter continues to serve as a mirror we must look into. Peter is every person who has ever sought to follow Jesus and wrestled with God’s claim upon us.

Jesus knew what he had to do. He realized that his words and actions challenged Imperial rule and religious authority alike, and were going to have consequences. They needed to. Changing unjust social, economic, and religious systems entails a cost, and Jesus was well aware of that. He knew what transforming systemic oppression would cost him. There was no denying it. To reconcile and reorientate life towards God’s desire to be in communion with creation, to bless creation required an act of surrender. Going to Jerusalem means facing the cross which Jesus will die upon. But, we also know that the cross is not the final word: Jesus’s resurrection will follow. To follow Jesus, we, like Peter, must accept that a resurrected life requires death; in our case death of the “self” in service towards others. However, Peter had a different view of the situation.

“If you know it’s going to cost you your life, why go to Jerusalem? That’s insane. No one surrenders to that fate without a fight. Withdraw and live another day.” – that is what Peter seems to be saying in today’s reading. Jesus, however, will have none of it. At this moment, Peter is a detractor to Jesus rather than a supporter, and Jesus calls him out on it.

*“Get behind me Satan! Jesus admonishes Peter. You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

A “stumbling block.” Peter, you are a stumbling block. Stumbling block is an English translation for the Greek word *skandalon*. That is the word in Greek that Jesus uses when he calls out Peter in his sin (another translation for *skandalon*). Stumbling block; sin. It also happens to be the root word in modern English for scandal. Peter’s admonishing of Jesus is scandalous in that it is an act of apostasy or false belief. Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah yet does not fully comprehend the scandal of the cross, which is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:23). It is Peter’s failure, as well as our failure, to understand what the call to discipleship means, or as the late theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer articulates: the cost of discipleship.

The call of discipleship is to reorientate one’s life toward God’s acting decisively and ultimately in Jesus. The cost of discipleship is what it entails to follow Jesus. To put this concept in our modern idiom, surrender is to pick up our cross – to surrender willfulness to God’s desire to be our source of blessing and being. The cross we are asked to bear is one of surrendering our life in service to another. For some that means martyrdom: Jesus gave his life, many of the disciples will give their life, Bonhoeffer gave his life as have others. For most of us here, it means giving up our ego, our ego-self. To gain life in Christ, we must die to our ego-self. Our self-importance, self-sufficiency, self-individualization, our narcissistic tendency towards self-aggrandizement. All these identifiers displace God as the source of our blessing. They are the apostasy, the sin of our self-reliance.

St. Paul understands the cross one must bear in order to follow Jesus. His cruciform theology identifies that we must reorientate our lives towards a life where we love one another with mutual affection and respect; hold to what is good and avoiding evil; give to the needs of others and extend hospitality to the stranger. It is an altruistic way of life predicated upon God being the source of our blessing rather than one built on greed and avarice in service to the self.

We live at an interesting time where economic, political, and even religious structures seek to alienate and marginalize vast segments of humanity and the environment in service to the ego-self – in other words in service to “it is all about me.” Living in the midst of these structures that seek to repudiate Paul’s invocation is not an easy task, nor is following Jesus. Indeed, we are very much like Peter,

seeking that path of least resistance in order to get along. But doing so will only foster further suffering for the disenfranchised and disempowered.

“Take up [your] cross and follow me” is what Jesus tells us. Surrender any idea of the “self” and be in communion with God – the source of our blessing and being. That is the cost of discipleship. The call of discipleship is to a resurrected life as a Eucharistic community. We can choose to follow Jesus and accept the cost of the cross, or, we can, like Peter, seek a path that does not infringe upon nor discomfort our “selves.” It is a question of following our heart or our ego. The choice is ours.

AMEN