

Proper 16 Year A: 26 / 27 August 2017
St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Rev. Gary Cyr, Rector

**God doesn't want a tithe from you,
minced out of the pocket change of your life.
God wants *all* of you**

Exodus 1:8-2:10
Psalm 124
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

"God doesn't want a tithe from you, minced out of the pocket change of your life. God wants *all* of you. All of your heart. All of your mind. All of your time, your energy, your resources. All of your hopes and dreams every bit of who you are and what you have, God wants you to put on the altar as an offering. How should that change the way you live your everyday, ordinary life?"
Eugene Peterson. *The Message Study Bible*. p.1761.

If God wants all of you, how does that impact the way you live your life? That's Peterson's question to us as regards St. Paul's letter to the Romans, particularly today's passage. That question helped frame my approach to these lessons since, quiet frankly, I was at a loss on how to engage them.

One of my last tasks on Sunday is to download the next week's scripture lessons and do a preliminary reading of them to see what surfaces in my consciousness as a thought to ruminate with in preparation for writing a sermon. At least that is my intention.

After reading today's lessons, I was perplexed: What do I say? Nothing in particular stood out. No first thought caught the imagination; no theological quandary presented itself. This isn't necessarily an uncommon experience, but it did leave me wondering what the Spirit was saying through these texts. So, I brought my uncertainty to the Wednesday Lectionary Study in the hopes that our conversation about the lessons would stir something up that I could work with. Though we had good conversation and meandered on tangents, nothing

stood out other than Peterson's comment on the Roman's passage. That's the way it was, at least until Thursday morning.

On Thursday morning, I happened upon a blog post from a woman who attended the resistance rally in Phoenix, AZ this past week. Her first-person narrative gave me an inside perspective of the experience she had. There were three incidences she shared: one where a large man stood nose to nose with her in an act of intimidation, another when a male "shoulder checked" her while she was walking, throwing her off balance some, and finally when she was being verbally accosted with a racial slur by another woman. In all of these instances, she maintained composure. However, she later admits in the blog that as she was lying in bed that evening she felt she should have confronted each of those individuals and called them on their behavior. I applaud her for not reacting, but responding through her blog which I read on Dan Rather's blog, thus indicating it was reaching a wide readership, which an in the moment reaction would not have done.

She made a choice that day to live her life according to her moral values where her response brought greater awareness to the bullying and intimidation tactics of those who aggressively hold on to unearned privilege. If only more followers of Jesus would show such moral fiber when faced with the corrosion of our shared Christian value: "love thy neighbor." Christians need good role models today more than ever. However, today's gospel gives us Peter.

Of all the Biblical characters who can act as role models, who can hold to the moral fiber of Jesus' teaching, Peter is a dubious choice. He's rash and impulsive – just a few weeks ago we heard of him leaping from the boat onto the churning waters to go and meet Jesus, only to lose sight of the situation and, well, we know how that story ends: Peter's all wet. We've heard of Peter have this wonderful mountain top experience after which he wants to build booths to commemorate the event for all to see rather than allow it to transform his heart. And, when surrounded by less than friendly folks, he will denounce knowing Jesus, not once, but three times no less. This same Peter is the one who today acts like an obnoxious student, the insufferable know-it-all of the classroom, the one who leaps up raising their hand saying

“ooh, ooh, call on me” even before the teacher has finished the question. Alas, he at least answers Jesus’ questions well.

Peter answers: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Not an insignificant statement, for this is the first time in Matthew’s Gospel, that it is not a Samaritan, Canaanite, Pharisee or some other outsider who identifies Jesus as being more than he seems. Jesus is the embodiment of all that God is and desires, and Peter understands. At least he does under good circumstances.

It is an easy act to make such statements of faith when one is surrounded by like-minded individuals. Peter is amongst friends, fellow followers of Jesus. Peter has shared in various revelations about Jesus, witnessed miracles, and participated in extraordinary events. All of these moments, however, were alongside fellow sojourners. It is only when he is surrounded by detractors or those who hold to a different view that he falters. In other words, it is easy to say I am a Christian, a follower of Jesus, here within these four walls, while it is altogether another matter to be in a more public secular place and make such a claim. What really underlies my dismay with Peter is that Peter is the mirror I must look into; he is my reflection when I look in the mirror.

That is the inconvenient truth: we, who are baptized, are always Christian, regardless of the situation we find ourselves in. God wants all of us to commit. God doesn’t want a tithe from you, minced out of the pocket change of your life. God wants *all* of you: all of your heart, your mind, your time, your energy, your resources, your hopes and dreams, every bit of who you are and what you have. That is why Peter is the mirror each of us must look into to see how we measure up to Jesus, the Messiah, the Living God’s expectation of us.

It is a challenge for me to wear my clerical collar in public. So much so that I good friend chided me once saying: “It is okay for me to come out of the clergy closet.” I give no concern to wearing the collar in church; it’s another matter wearing to get lunch at McDonald’s here in the Village of Clinton. Public evangelism has never come easy to me, yet I feel called to such witness. My collar is not simply a sign of my office. It is a physical reminder that I am baptized and as such bound to Christ. The collar is simply that: a slave collar: one that

reminds me I am bound to another, and that other is Christ; that I am in service to others. It is also a visible sign to those who see it, that, if they too are baptized, they are also bound to Christ.

Peter and the other followers of Jesus were bound to him. Yes, they faltered many times, yet they persevered. Together, they gave all that they had and were in service to Christ and Christ's message of love and justice – what my ethics professor in seminary calls justice-love. This is what crossed my mind when I read that blogpost Thursday morning.

I have no idea if the author was Christian or not. It doesn't matter. Her words gave voice to a faithful witness to her beliefs and values, especially when faced with opposition. The moral fiber of her convictions sustained her during a moment of public witness. We, you and I, are the Body of Christ incarnate in the world. We are bound to Christ through baptism. That baptism calls us into a deeper awareness of our promises to justice-love as expressed in the Anglican Marks of Mission – predicated upon the questions we are asked in the baptismal rite.

To proclaim the Good News of the Kin-dom of God.

To teach, baptize and nurture new believers.

To respond to human need by loving service.

To seek to transform unjust structures of society.

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation,
and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

This is justice-love. This is what it means to give all of ourselves to God. This is what it means to answer Jesus's question: Who do you say that I am? The gospel leaves us then with a question or two: When we look into the mirror that Peter holds up, what is the reflection we see? How should that reflection change the way you live your everyday, ordinary life?

AMEN