**September 13, 2015 – 16th Sunday after Pentecost**

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Whenever I read this passage from Mark, and the similar one from Matthew, I can’t help but feel that Jesus is a little hard on Peter. After all, Peter has just acknowledged for the first time that Jesus is the Anointed One, the Christ, the Messiah they’ve all been waiting for. Jesus should be happy that his disciples finally get it. But instead of congratulating Peter, Jesus very sternly tells them all to keep it under their hats for now. I wonder if Matthew also felt that way and fixed it in his version by adding an “attaboy” from Jesus to Peter, before the “get behind me Satan” part.

So Jesus doesn’t acknowledge Peter’s confession other than to tell them not to talk about it. Then, without any warning, he launches into teaching them what actually will happen to him, as opposed to the dream they have about a Messiah-King who will throw the Romans out on their ears and re-establish the Kingdom of Israel once and for all.

So Peter takes him aside and says, “C’mon Jesus, you’re harshing our vibe here. Ix-nay on the uffering-say in front of the ildren-chay!” And Jesus responds with the famous line, “Get behind me, Satan!” So much for the party atmosphere!

A couple of questions come to mind here. First, why did Jesus choose this moment to drop the bomb on his followers? Second, why did Peter react so strongly? And third, why did Jesus react so strongly to Peter’s strong reaction?

The answer to the first question, why did Jesus choose this moment, is because the disciples seemed ready to hear it. They had seen several miracles – feeding, healing, casting out demons – and had been sent out themselves to do the same. They seemed to understand a new relationship with God’s law, through Jesus’ example. And now, they, or at least Peter, seemed to understand the true nature of Jesus as the Messiah.

And Jesus knew that the Jewish authorities and probably the Roman officials were looking for ways to trap him and get rid of him once and for all. He knew he would soon be heading to Jerusalem for the last time to face his fate there. He undoubtedly knew a sense of urgency because time was short, and he had so much to tell his disciples before his death.

But who is ever ready to hear such news? When my mom was diagnosed with a brain tumor and the doctor explained that because of the type of cancer it was, it was inoperable, I was simply not prepared to hear that she was going to die soon, and so it took awhile to fully take it in. Peter and his disciples were only human. They didn’t want to hear what Jesus was saying to them, so they started out in denial.

The Greek word for rebuke – *epitimáo* – is an interesting one. The fundamental meaning is not one of reprimanding, but rather one of warning, specifically warning to prevent something from going wrong. So Peter wasn’t necessarily chastising Jesus, but rather warning him about the effect his words might have on his followers. Perhaps he was afraid that Jesus would lose his followers, or perhaps, as a leader of sorts, he was concerned for their feelings and worried that they’d get discouraged.

Then Jesus takes the conversation public. He turns away from Peter and looks at the disciples before rebuking Peter right back. So his line, “Get behind me, Satan,” was probably as much directed at them as it was at Peter. And the next line certainly was: “For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!”

Satan is kind of a loaded word. Its roots are from the Hebrew, *satan*, which means adversary. In the book of Job, Satan shows up as the adversary of God – like a prosecuting attorney. So while we think of Satan as having horns and a pitchfork, that’s likely not what Jesus means here. He’s not calling Peter a devil, but rather saying that he needs Peter to be one hundred percent on board with him, and not opposing him as they move forward; and he’s using very strong language to make sure of it.

Once again, the urgency of Jesus’ situation comes through, especially in his use of loaded words. He doesn’t have the time for his followers to gradually ease into this new understanding. He has to get it across to them NOW. Once again, the word for rebuke – *epitimáo* – comes into play. He’s not yelling at them, or even at Peter, but he needs to warn them about the dangers and challenges that they will face as his disciples. And they need to get it.

Jesus then turns his attention to the crowd around the disciples, who were no doubt listening in fascination at what might be the break-up of the band, and he brings them into the conversation, too. “If any of you, not just these guys, want to become my followers, here’s what you have to do,” he tells them, and proceeds to lay out what it means to be his disciple.

“Deny yourself. Take up your cross,” which would have been very meaningful, and terrifying, to anyone in Roman-occupied Palestine at that time. “If you want to hold on to your life, forget about it – it’s lost. But if you are willing to die for my sake and for the sake of God’s good news, you will be saved.”

Jesus is talking on two levels here – the physical and the spiritual. He certainly is warning them that they may die in his cause, but he’s also talking about their eternal salvation. Mark uses the word, “*psuché*” here for “life” instead of “*zoé*.” *Psuché* also means “soul” or “innermost being,” so it has a double meaning in this context.

As I said, there’s an urgency behind Jesus’ speech here. Not only because of the time but because of the importance of what he’s trying to tell them. It’s literally a matter of life and death. He’s telling them that there are two sides – God’s side and the world’s side, and the cost for choosing the world’s side is their very souls. If you choose the world, you lose your life. It’s as simple as that. No compromises.

When Jesus talks about the adulterous and sinful generation, he doesn’t just mean sex. The word for adulterous – *moichalis* – does mean a married person who sleeps with someone else, but it also means someone who worships anything other than the true God. All of a sudden, that door is open a lot wider!

What do we worship other than God, I wonder? Well, I can think of quite a few things – money, fame, power, security, sports and sports figures, celebrities, television, scandal, gossip, alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, liturgy, orthodoxy, anger, revenge, even fear – the list goes on and on. Anything that takes your mind off of God and off of following Jesus, could go on that list.

I don’t mean momentary distractions that happen every day. We ARE human after all, as Peter so aptly demonstrates for us time and time again. I mean things that are held up in the place of God in our hearts. Things that we have to be constantly alert for in our lives.

I’ve mentioned this before, but I think we are on the threshold of big changes in the Church (with a capital C). The privilege of the old way of doing Church – or the Imperial Church as it has been called, meaning the Christianity that came into being after Constantine made it both legal and favored, is truly a thing of the past. For us, this means that the idea that it’s enough to merely come to church on Sunday morning is also a thing of the past. Just as the Church is being transformed, so must we, the body of Christ, be transformed.

And just as Jesus felt with his disciples, there’s an urgency to this need for transformation. Otherwise the world and all its temptations will run right over us. But any kind of transformation doesn’t come easily to a species who hates change – namely the human race. And the kind of transformation Jesus is talking about – becoming people who are willing to face death for the sake of the Gospel, is even harder.

It all comes down to the term “deny yourself.” This doesn’t mean to wear hair shirts and eat locusts and honey. But it does mean to put God ahead of ourselves in all situations. And it also means to put the needs of others before our own needs.

This past week, on September 9th, the Episcopal Church commemorated Constance and Her Companions, or the Memphis Martyrs, as they were also called. Constance was a nun in the Episcopal order of the Sisters of St. Mary. She and several others stayed behind to help during a yellow fever epidemic that hit Memphis in 1878 and killed a quarter of the city’s remaining population. Constance and two other nuns, along with two Episcopal priests lost their lives during the epidemic.

We, as a species, are particularly fond of our skins and will go to great lengths to avoid dying. It’s part of who we are, as a race. But we are also capable of great sacrifice. So how do we go from being neck-saving, dying-averse people to someone who would stay behind in a city where there is a good chance of catching a fatal disease?

Jesus. Jesus changes who we are. Not just our hearts and minds, although those are changed, too. But fundamentally who we are as people. At our Baptism we undergo the greatest change, becoming forever a member of the Body of Christ. But just as a child doesn’t stay the same after it’s born, we, too, grow up and develop and move deeper into the mystery of God’s love for us. The ultimate goal of all this transformation is to be at home with Christ, as his brothers and sisters.

Sometimes these changes come overnight, but more often than not they are gentle and gradual until we find, in a moment of great need, that stepping up, or even risking our lives, has become part of who we are. Of who God wants us to be.

Let us pray together for God’s transformation, and for our willingness to accept it in our lives.

*Lord, our God Almighty Transformer and Creator*

*Your image is seen in the faces of men and women*

*gathered before you with pleas of despair*

*and with hearts filled with hope.*

*Gracious God, your church has experienced the pangs*

*of birth and its infancy on the shores of the Mediterranean.*

*Be with your church as it continues its growth*

*across the world into adulthood and full unity.*

*We pray for your gift of transformation.*

*Revive in us a spirit of community.*

*Mold our thoughts into ones of love.*

*Instill in us a sense of your peace and reconciliation.*

*Give us the courage and resilience to accept transformation*

*For ourselves and for others,*

*For the ones who suffer and those who inflict suffering,*

*For the victims and the perpetrators and for all your people.*

*In a world filled with violence and hatred*

*give us the courage to sow love and harmony.*

*In a world rampant with discrimination and inequity,*

*grow among us the seeds of unity and the foresight to see and resolve our divisions.*

*Prepare our hearts, minds and hands to reap your harvest. [[1]](#footnote-1)*

Amen

1. *Prayer of Transformation, Ecumenical Review 57 no 3 Jl 2005, p 275* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)