

13 Sunday after Pentecost A

Romans 12: 9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

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Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Edmonton
August 30, 2020
24th Sunday of Social Distancing

Grace and peace from Jesus of Nazareth.

As we approach the stories of the Bible it's helpful to recall that they were not recorded moment by moment as the action happened or as miracles unfolded. The earliest first Testament texts are recorded about 50 years after Jesus died and was resurrected. A lot can happen in 50 years and part of what happened was that the followers of Jesus began to process what had occurred, what it meant and what they were to do going forward. It didn't happen overnight!

Here, Matthew is helping the listeners of his day process the death of Jesus – helping them all understand and envision the commitment to a life of faith. In this story we hear the extent that Jesus is willing to go in the mission to love the world, and we hear the truth about our challenges to stay the course.

Last week, Peter was praised as a model of faith and belief when Jesus asked him “who do you say that I am?” Confidently, Peter said that Jesus was the Messiah (which is a word meaning “anointed.”) Jesus praised the answer, saying that's the kind of faith and trust that the church will be built upon! Peter was called a “rock” and we might have all wished at one time or another to have faith like that, that we could be like Peter. But, this morning is quite another story when literally only a few verses later Peter becomes a stumbling block and even called “Satan!” Ouch!

That word, “Satan” or the “Devil” has come to be personified, but really it means *an adversary, opponent, or enemy*, it's not really referring to some red-dressed-pitch-forked dude running around conspiring against us, but that it is actually part of our humanity – doesn't that change things!

We all know sometimes we are right on point, recognizing fully the love and grace of God and sometimes we miss the mark, just like this story of Peter.

What happened? How could Peter so quickly get off track? Perhaps it was that Peter was riding on the wave of popularity that was growing around Jesus. People were listening, the word was out about the carpenter from Nazareth, stories were being shared about the way he challenged the authorities, stood up for the oppressed, and healed

people. Pretty exciting stuff! It's easy to be a groupie in the midst of popularity and power.

But, then to hear this very same person that Peter looked up to explain that love was costly, that he was willing to spend his entire life to change the world, even if it went all the way to suffering and death – well that was too much for Peter. At the time Peter could only see all his dreams crashing to an end. So, he boldly steps in to set Jesus straight. He steps in to remind Jesus that they had a good thing going. In absolute love and concern he says “not on my watch,” he's never going to let Jesus suffer and be killed. And with those words, as soon as his own interests took priority, he stood in the way of God's mission.

Peter thought that he was part of a select group with a mission to reset the balances of power, to restore Israel to its rightful place – to finally make it known that the Jewish people were the chosen ones. But, Jesus didn't come to join the mission or cause of the Jewish people, he came to enact God's.

This time in the world is most unusual. You know as well as I do that everything seems turned on it's head. All of the familiar comforts are either gone or reduced to a sliver of what they once were. And we bemoan this – still wishing we could go back to what we used to know, what we used to do and how we used to do it.

But, I believe that we have an unprecedented opportunity before us, an opportunity to reshape our communities, because for the first time in a long time we are invited to carefully examine this life and clear out the “stuff” that has accumulated and that prevents us from living out our baptismal calling.

Today begs the question – what is really important to us as a community in Christ? Are we willing to recognize that faith isn't lived in the pews, but where we live?

At our Wednesday night book club we talked about this, with some commenting on how they have realized how much they have taken for granted, including their faith and the church. Like Peter, have we been far too interested in our own interests and individual comfort than we have been about where God was leading?

And if we're really interested in where God is leading – how are we going to find out? Perhaps, I might suggest, it's by renewing our commitment to a God who is completely committed to us. The church, in this socially distancing time, is still at work, dispersed in the world, neighbourhoods,

workplaces, alleyways, boardrooms and zoom rooms. We are charged with repurposing all that we absorbed and loved on Sunday mornings all these years to now serve the world. The cost of a committed life of faith is high, but the cost of living it halfway is no life at all.

God would die for us. Jesus was not willing to compromise his mission of equality, healing, justice, community, and liberation for any price. Salvation was not for sale, but a gift given at a great expense.

Peter would learn to embrace this gift after Jesus ascended. Left with no Jesus to follow, but on fire with the Holy Spirit he did become the “Rock” of the church. He learned to let go of his own agenda.

If I take off my Alb – my identity as a child of God does not go away. Even if I take off my clergy shirt – my call to preach the love of Christ is not removed. If you are not in the church building – you are still part of God’s mission. If you are a follower of Jesus you are invited into changing the world.

So, use your voice to speak for the poor, to call out the injustices you see. Call the city and advocate for low income housing and other supports for vulnerable communities.

Use your position to change social policies to promote equality in employment, education, and to uphold universal access to health care.

Teach your children the value of a life of faith and renew your own commitment. Come to worship – even if it’s online. Explore new ways to stay connected.

Learn to identify the trap of consumerism and the scaffolding of power. Remember that the Holy Spirit provides what we need and is our source of worth. Give generously and consistently, because it changes our relationship with it.

Pray, asking what God would want, rather than for more of what you already have. Because the truth is, we are abundantly blessed.

Use this opportunity, this time of change to allow God to work in your heart, revealing all that you know deep inside right down to your bones.

Be sincere in love – because love is the currency that changes us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.