

Pentecost 3 – June 21, 2020 Cycle A

Imagine, if you can, being “in the shoes” of Peter, James, or John. Recall that one day, as they worked on the shores of Galilee “mending their nets”, Jesus walked by and said, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people!” At the time, it must have seemed pretty exciting. Here was this “new” rabbi – the one everyone was talking about, who spoke with great Scriptural knowledge and authority, whose words seemed to reach right down into a person’s soul – and he was calling them, asking them to be his disciples! It had to have been a tempting offer; exhilarating. At the moment, their lives were simply this: day after day of the “same”. Getting up far before the sun, heading out on to the lake to fish – catching some if they were lucky, the back-breaking task of hauling it back to shore... only to see the “lion’s share” taken away by Roman taxes! And afterwards, spend time repairing nets and maintaining their boats, only to start again the next day... If they had any doubts about the future, they need only look at Zebedee – the father and James and John – to see: the result of endless days of hard labor. Perhaps not too surprising then, that Peter and the others “dropped” everything for the chance to follow Jesus, to be part of his work. Rumors had already circulated that he “might be the one, the Messiah!” But the future they hoped for in that moment turned out to be a lot different than their expectations.

For one thing, despite Jesus’ ability to perform miracles of healing and the removal of demons, his ministry was not universally popular. The authorities in Jerusalem didn’t care for Jesus’ activities at all. They saw in him only a threat, a destabilizing influence. You see, if you’re on “top of the heap”, the last thing you want is someone messing around with the foundations on which you sit! Israel may be under the control of the Romans, but at least they had the “good sense” to know they needed the priests, scribes, and Pharisees “on their side”. Jesus’ criticisms of the way things were being run threatened “their arrangement” with the Romans. And they worried about just what Jesus was “up to”. Did he really think he was doing God’s work, or was he just “after their jobs”? Either way, Jesus was “trouble” as far as these authorities were concerned. Such opposition worried Peter and the others, but not too much. They had seen Jesus “in action”! What could a few collaborators in Jerusalem do against God’s power – as Jesus was clearly able to wield? Not much, or so they thought. That’s because they really didn’t understand the nature of Jesus’ work. Especially, that Jesus had not come to compete for “power” as it was used by Rome and its allies. Jesus had come for God’s purpose and no other!

Yet Jesus fully understood his disciples, that they had “expectations” incompatible with the work he had come to accomplish. Like the authorities in Jerusalem, the disciples had visions of wielding some sort of “earthly” power – albeit with God’s backing. Jesus knew that Peter and the others were “biding their time”, waiting for the moment when Jesus would “spring into action” and take down, not only the Pharisees and the others, but Rome itself! The disciples had “visions” of the offices they would hold, the power they would have. After all, Jesus had already granted them the “authority” to cure disease and “cast out demons”! “Who knew what would come next!” It was very exciting, but also very mistaken. Therefore Jesus said to them, “A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave

above the master... If they have called the master of the house “ruler of the demons”, how much more will they malign those of his household!” (Matthew 10:24) This was Jesus’ way of letting them know that if he was hated and insulted, they could expect much worse! Not exactly what they had imagined of their future in the moments after they had dropped their nets. Suddenly, the life of an ordinary fisherman did not look quite so bad!

Jesus knew he had frightened them. That was good. They should have no illusions about what lay ahead. But neither did Jesus want to have them cowering and afraid. Therefore he spoke these words of reassurance, “Nothing is so secret that it will not become known... Do not be afraid of those who can only kill the body; instead, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell! Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:26-30)! Jesus knew that the forces arrayed ahead of them were formidable, that they wielded the power of the fear of death very effectively. Rome was a master of death. The disciples knew this, obviously. But Jesus wanted them to be clear – following him granted them no immunity from persecution or even death! Jesus, himself, would be crucified! They could expect no less as his disciples! But Roman power, as frightening as it was, could only harm the body; it could not touch the soul! And God sees all! Nothing happens without his knowledge! All actions taken on Jesus’ behalf or for the sake of the Kingdom will be known by God! And the opposite is also true – God knows of all the “hidden things” people do in the dark when they think no one can see. God will fulfill all justice – some to a heavenly future, and some to their well-deserved punishment!

As it was for the disciples, so it is for all today. We who are Christians – followers of Jesus Christ, who act, not for our sake, but for the sake of our neighbors and for God’s Kingdom – our actions are known by God, who knows even the number of hairs on our heads! At the world’s end, at the time of judgment, God’s Son, Jesus Christ will be our witness and testify on our behalf. So too will Jesus deny those, who in this life denied others justice, and in so doing, denied Jesus himself! “There is nothing hidden that will not become known!” Then the “shoe will be on the other foot”, so to speak. Those who have failed to love “neighbor as self” in this life are those who will be afraid! Yet this is not cause for joy, but sadness – that so many have made this choice! Our calling in Jesus is not to celebrate, but like him, to reach out in the hope that all might be saved! This is the calling of our faith, what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ. It is the faith in which we baptize – that we might welcome as many as possible into God’s family! It is the reason we gather to worship – that we might help and support each other in times of trouble and of joy! And it the reason why we celebrate Holy Communion. For Jesus commanded that we do, and that in it, Jesus promised the forgiveness of our sins – that he will give testimony to God on our behalf that we are indeed his sisters and brothers, and therefore have life in his name!

Amen