

The Second Sunday in Lent - Year B
March 8, 2009
The Reverend Brett P. Backus

“Discipleship”

Mark 8:31-38

“For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Today's Gospel message is about Discipleship. It is about learning to give up ourselves in order to truly and successfully serve the Lord.

You know, I always wonder what in the world Peter actually said to Jesus when he “re-buked” Him as our Gospel tells us this morning. I mean, what could Peter have possibly said to make Jesus so angry, even angry enough to call the poor guy Satan? It seems like such a visceral reaction on Jesus' part, one of pure emotion, like when one speaks or reacts before thinking. Yet, as I thought on this in preparing for today's sermon, it occurred to me that perhaps Jesus' reaction entails more than just visceral emotion. Come to think of it, can we honestly say that we have ever witnessed Jesus react purely emotionally and without reason? Do the actions and words of Jesus not always point to a bigger picture or message intended for our growth? So, today, like always, I am pretty certain that if we just take a step back and examine this interesting interaction between Jesus and Peter, and the words of our Savior in today's Gospel reading, we might just encounter an important message for ourselves as Christians, and particularly for Christians who find themselves presently creeping through this reflective season we call Lent.

Now, usually when I hear this statement made by Jesus, “For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things,” I typically take this to be a warning or caution against materialism and material wealth. To me this phrase has normally meant that we as humans focus too much on possessions and worldly events, and we choose not to worry enough about the things of God. But this morning, I must ask whether or not that is a good understanding of what Jesus is saying. When Jesus tells Peter and His disciples to give up their lives and to not focus on human things, what is He really saying? Is He somehow calling us all to be martyrs, or to delve immediately and completely into selfless acts of asceticism? Though in different times throughout the history of the Church this is the way this morning's scripture has been interpreted, I have to say here that I see a little bit of a different message for us this morning. To use somewhat of a cliché, I think that what Jesus is really saying to us this morning is to let go and let God. He is telling us that to follow Him, we must first get out of the way and permit God to work in our lives.

Now, this perhaps is over simplifying Jesus' message for us, but I do think that it may get at the heart of what Jesus is trying to show us.

See, our true struggle as humans trying to be disciples of Christ is our inability to get rid of our own ego. Sometimes it seems that it is our ego or our self which is our greatest enemy and distraction, and this is pretty bad news because such a thing is not very easily combated. But it is just our Human Nature, pure and simple. We, just being who we are as human beings, are what creates the greatest barrier preventing us from embracing true Christian discipleship. As I read over today's Gospel in preparation for this morning, this is what Jesus' message to Peter and His disciples seemed to point to for me. Jesus calls us to lose our lives for His sake, but could it be that He is not really referring to our physical lives?

As I reflect on what the common person's life looks like in today's world, being over scheduled, over worked, hurried, stressed, distracted, spent, it occurs to me that perhaps the greatest thing we as Christians could sacrifice in the name of Christ would be not our physical lives, but our daily lives. Our time, our moment to moment lives, our attention. Perhaps the greatest thing we could give to God in this day in age would be our conscious recognition of His presence with us and in all things. To actually consciously take the time to give thanks to God for all we have. To consciously take the time to give thanks to God for all we experience. Perhaps this is what Jesus means when He says that we are to lose our lives in order to gain them. For only when we empty ourselves of ourselves or of whatever may be the artificial and temporary stuff that fills us, only then can we even begin to make space for God's presence. To live in this way would enable us as Christians to begin to become disciples of Christ and to truly begin to concentrate on the things of the Divine, and not on the things of humans.

I had an experience or a learning last week that I think fits nicely into today's Gospel message and I would like to share it with you. This morning and last Sunday during the Sunday school hour, one of Ascension's own priests, Mary Lee Bergeron, was teaching two sessions to our high school students on healing prayer and meditation both as a means of describing her own faith journey and walk with Christ while at the same time providing our young people with an important spiritual experience. During last week's session Mary Lee said something to our youth that struck me personally as she described the difference between prayer and meditation to our class. She explained that prayer is when we request something of God, and that meditation is when we silence our minds and our lives enough that we are able listen for or feel God's response and guidance. She went on to say that most of us ask much of God. We pray, and that's good, but we rarely manage to take the time out from our busy lives to sit in silence and attempt to listen to God's response and guidance. In other words, we rarely take the time to shift our focus from the things and worries of this world to the true and important things of God. This teaching struck me, because I think that this is exactly what Jesus is saying to us in today's Gospel. This idea is

what drives Jesus' response to Peter, and it is the idea behind the rest of His illustrations in the end half of today's Gospel reading. Jesus is telling us today that in order to be disciples and follow Him, we must first lose our lives. In other words, we must first empty ourselves and make the space for God to enter and the time to recognize His presence within us.

In thinking about this message and about the liturgical season we currently find ourselves in as a community, I would like to encourage us all to do something this morning. I would like to encourage us all to take advantage and to take seriously this Lenten season. My hope is that we might take advantage of this Lenten season, where we are gifted with the opportunity to be reflective, through our liturgy and our services. I hope that we might take advantage of this Lenten season when we have the opportunity to walk in the same footsteps of Jesus our Savior as He did in His last days. When we have the opportunity to witness or experience His actions and Love for us, and to reflect on ourselves and our lives through our many rich traditions. Participate in these Lenten and Holy week services, and participate in our traditions intentionally and consciously. Not so that in some strange way we might be able to suffer for Christ as He did for us, or that we might torture ourselves through self denial. But participate in these things so that we might be able to avoid the very thing that Jesus warns Peter of in today's Gospel. Fast, and self examine, and reflect on the last days of Jesus and His saving sacrificial act, so that we too might forget about our selves for just a tiny moment and so that we too might finally make the necessary space within ourselves to see, to hear, to feel, or better yet, so that we might consciously be able to clearly recognize the divine things of this life.....the constant presence and guidance of God in each of our lives.

“For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.”

Amen