

11 Pentecost, Proper 17 – August 28, 2011
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Jeremiah 15: 15-21
Psalm 26: 1-8
Romans 12: 9-21
Matthew 16: 21-28

Alone and Distinct

In the name of God the Creator of Love, God the Beloved, and God the Spirit of Love –

Today's Gospel feels ominous at first hearing: *Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.* Peter, the good boy from last Sunday, has gone from being the rock upon which the church is founded to a stumbling block in the way of God's salvation plan that necessitates Jesus' death and suffering. This Gospel is a transition in Matthew's narrative; we hear the transition in the first phrase of the passage: *From that time on.* It is the first time that Jesus tells the Disciples of his impending death and resurrection. In this passage and in subsequent ones Jesus directs his teaching to the disciples and not to the assembly; and his teaching gets more direct and more difficult for them to hear.

None of us want to hear the news that someone we love is nearing death. Peter's "God forbid; this must never happen to you!" speaks, I believe, for all of us when we attempt to deny the impending death of someone near us. We want to bind them to life, not loose them to the unknown of death. I found myself wondering, when I read this passage, about the instructions Martin Luther King Jr, whose monument is being dedicated today in Washington D.C., would have said to those near him about the dangers of following his way: or Nelson Mandela, or Nobel Prize Winner Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, Gandhi, or Sojourner Truth. Their message would have been similar: "Following me is dangerous; your day-to-day lives will change in inconceivable ways."

Last week Peter was blessed as the rock; this week he is rebuked for offering Jesus the temptation of avoiding suffering. Ironically, the next passage in Matthew's Gospel is The Transfiguration. Let me read a portion of it to you.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

How do we see Jesus as distinct, alone, fully incarnate, the bearer – in today's

Gospel passage - of difficult news? We don't want him to tell us about his suffering and death, even with the promise of resurrection. It's just too much to take in and too great a mystery to comprehend. We want him to tell us about love, inclusion, compassion, and reconciliation. Even repentance is easier than this. Furthermore, we want to stay in the peaceful and joyous moment; we want to build little dwellings for those we love and camp out forever in bliss – never continuing with life as it really is. But God says unequivocally, "Listen to him!" God's imperative gives us no choice.

In this moment when Jesus revealed his coming death and suffering, he needed the disciples to see him alone and distinct, not surrounded by their projections of his power or the aura of his miracles. In our own lives here and now, how do we let ourselves see those in our own families or dear friends in the moments of their need as themselves – alone and distinct? When they have difficult news to tell us, do we stop and truly listen or do we deflect or make nice instead?

Traveling back home from a wonderful Episcopal task group gathering in California, I got stuck overnight at Dulles Airport. Because of severe thunderstorms, the airport was put on an indefinite "ground stop." That's a euphemism for "Ain't no one going no place tonight!" My flight to Burlington was canceled, as were most other flights in and out. Most of you have been in this situation at least once. The result of the cancellation was 2 ½ hours on line at the paradoxically named "Customer Service Counter," an hour-long line for cabs to get to a hotel, a short night's sleep, and the uncertainty of whether I could get home the next day or live in limbo at the low rent end of the Dulles airport forever.

Even though I was surrounded by a multitude of other travelers, I felt for a time completely unseen, unheard, and isolated. However, it did begin to dawn on me – given time to wallow in the egocentricity of self-pity - that I was not an island. As I began to look, even sporadically, beyond my own needs and allow myself not to shut out, deflect or ignore the suffering and needs of others, I slowly began to see people as distinct individuals, and I began to interact with them in their distress and healing began. As God said to Peter, James and John, "Listen to him." Listening to others in distress is a powerful way to know them and to see the incarnate presence of Jesus in their very distress!

Once my ears were opened, here is what I found. There were several groups of people trying to get to Vermont to register for the Triathlon. After listening, I was able to tell them about Vermont and suggest alternate ways to get Burlington. A woman in line at the help counter just behind me was silently crying. I decided to step out of myself and ask her about her predicament. It turned out she was flying home from Eastern Europe for an oncology appointment at Fletcher Allen the next day, which she would certainly miss. She was without US currency or a credit card. I gave her money and supported her as she figured out her next steps. I was not able to interact with or help a woman from Eastern Africa who had missed two international flights. In her distress and confusion she had cut to the front of the two-hour plus line and was acting out her anger quite dramatically. I attempted, at least, to shelve my own irritation at her line cutting and tried to connect with her exhaustion and lack of emotional and cultural resources. Later on, a man sitting in the waiting room next to me was trying to get to his Uncle's funeral and had missed it. As I listened to him, I heard more and more of his amazing life story, including a recounting of a devastating and life-changing accident and injury. And, as in

all waiting areas and lines to fly to Vermont, we discovered several mutual connections here in Burlington.

I had to check in with and bug - seemingly inconveniencing - several counter people during this episode. One was a woman from the Caribbean. After sending me back across the width of the Dulles airport more than once - many times up and down stairs and escalators with all my luggage, and several weary rides on the underground train – I found myself back in front of her as a stand-by passenger and again at her mercy. She said, “Honey, there is nothing I can tell you or do for you.” I looked at her – really looked at her – and said, “I only need to know one thing; is there any chance I will get on the next flight.” She softened just a little and said, “Yes honey, there’s a good chance.” And I smiled and said, “That’s all I needed.” When I successfully boarded the much-delayed flight, I said, “I feel like I need to give you a hug.” She beamed and opened her arms for the hug that we both needed more than either of us realized.

As with the disciples - hearing for the first time about Jesus’ impending suffering and death - in our own distress, fatigue, anxiety, and irritation, it is almost impossible to perceive the needs those around us. Those in our congregation who are part of the Pastoral Care team and who visit parishioners in hospital, nursing homes, or those shut in at home know that the most healing thing they can do is listen. They do not divert, make nice, or move the conversation to easy topics. Certainly, light conversation, banter, or laughter is sometimes the best medicine, however this is not helpful if it replaces a deeper sharing that needs to take place that involves fears, anxieties, or confusion.

Today’s Epistle from Romans is good advice for all of us engaged in listening to those in need. I re-titled it: *Lessons for an airport cancellation*. Listen.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. And the Epistle continues: Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Jesus’ challenging rebuke to Peter reminds all of us that life is messy, often unpredictable, and continually presents us with situations with which we would rather not have to deal. We live with this duality or dialectic all the time. What are we to do? We certainly don’t want to live our lives constantly in pain and confusion just as we can’t spend our lives walking around wearing rose-colored glasses. The answer, I believe, is right here in our light-filled nave where this duality is visually expressed. On the north wall we have our powerful icon Christ in Majesty. It is a glorious and victorious image of the risen Christ as king, nurturer, wisdom-giver, rock and protector. On the west wall by the high pulpit, on the other hand, we see the icon of Jesus crucified, his skin punctured by nails, his blood oozing out – confronting us with the very image of human pain. We must listen to both, see them both as distinct and yet completely joined, and live and worship here in the dynamic, ever changing in-between. It is here that we can stand in our own fear, confusion, and need; and it is here that we are given the gift and courage to “see no one except Jesus himself alone.” And it is all we need.

AMEN