

13 Pentecost, Proper 17, Yr. A

August 30, 2020

Jeremiah 15: 15-21, Matthew 16:21-28

Last week, you'll remember that when Jesus turned to the disciples and said, WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM, Peter was the one who had the right answer – you are the Christ, the Messiah. I mentioned last week that Peter had the words right, but didn't really understand their implications. In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus spells out those implications, telling them that he was going to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die and then, he says, ON THE THIRD DAY BE RAISED. But Peter didn't listen through to the end. For some reason, he missed the BEING RAISED part completely. He just heard that first part about suffering and death and said, NO, that isn't going to happen. Why do you think? Part of it has to be, as we've talked many times before, about his understanding of the Messiah who would conquer NOT one who would suffer. Part of it had to be that he loved Jesus and didn't want to hear that about him. Part of it surely must have been thinking that if that could happen to Jesus, what could happen to ME? Part of it would have been that he didn't have experience of resurrection, so no context within which to place that prediction. And for his words,

he earns one of the strongest rebukes in the scriptures when Jesus turns to him and says, “Get thee behind me Satan!” If you will remember all the way back to the beginning of the Gospel, when Jesus was baptized and then went into the desert where he was tempted by the devil – tempted to reach for all the things the world holds up as success, especially power. And, when Jesus refused those temptations, the text said that the devil left him to return at a more opportune time. That must have been on Jesus’ mind when Peter said – no! Suffering isn’t the way to power! Messiahs inflict suffering, they don’t undergo it! Surely Jesus was hearing that earlier temptation, only now it was coming from a friend and disciple. Jesus’ rebuke is really strong and one wonders if he had been thinking the same thing himself – that perhaps he should just go back to Galilee and lay low for a while. Jesus knew what had just happened to John the Baptist and, as a good Jew, he also knew how most of the prophets ended up.

Look at that first reading, the one from Jeremiah. In the passage we heard this morning, Jeremiah is bemoaning the fact that he ever got into the prophet business at all. His message, like that of many of the prophets, was focused on all the injustice in Israel, the oppression of the poor, the

corruption of the leaders. As you might guess that wasn't a popular message among the powerful. He's been declared a public nuisance, people have tried to kill him, he's been rejected by the religious leaders and barred from the temple, identified as a traitor to the state – that's a lot of suffering. And Jeremiah's not happy about it. I'm sure we'd feel the same. Don't we spend a lot of time avoiding suffering? The utilitarian school of philosophy was built on the central premise that people want to have pleasure and avoid pain.

One commentator wrote about seeing a sculpture of what he described as a thin, thin human being with big, big feet. The title was "The Prophet." He referred to it as the embodiment of the fragile human condition with a strongly-grounded foundation. A prophet is a fragile, tired, think, weak-looking human being, yet grounded – anchored in a life-giving calling and ministry. Big feet, firmly grounded and anchored.

It's a good image. Think first about those feet. Jesus' feet were taking him to Jerusalem, not because he wanted to die, but because being faithful to his call meant that he had to go there. Peter, and maybe most of us, would be tempted to point our feet in the opposite direction. I remember reading something Frederick

Buechner wrote in which he said that if you want to know what you really believe, watch to see where your feet take you.

But thinking about those big feet on the sculpture, and the idea they portray of being anchored: Jeremiah was anchored in his role as prophet. Jesus was anchored in his role as the incarnate Son of God, sent to live out God's will as a fully human, fully loving person. And that life upset a lot of powerful people who tried to end it – unsuccessfully I might add.

In this passage, once Jesus says he's going to suffer and die and then be raised, he goes on to say that Peter is setting his mind on human things, not divine things. That's surely a temptation for all of us – that temptation to find meaning and happiness in material success and accumulation. Sorry, says Jesus, that's not what following me is about. To follow me you have to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me. Ground your feet in my teachings and set them on this path that I'm walking. And be careful – if you spend all your time trying to save your life, living only for yourself, cocooning yourself, in the end, you will have lost it. Because true life lies in giving yourself away, in the kind of free, joyful, generous and loving life you can have if you follow me.

What we can miss here, with talk of taking up the cross, is that the cross and the resurrection are never separate. The cross does NOT mean that we're asked to be masochists, or door-mats, or, as the church unfortunately taught for years, that we have to remain in abusive situations. Instead, the cross is an on-going challenge to love. That very often calls us away from our self-centeredness, asking us to put other's needs before our own. Many of us learn this quite naturally – in a marriage, in raising children, in deep friendships, in any kind of service.

In Paul's letters he points out that the cross is a stumbling block for the Jews and foolishness for Gentiles. Yes, if you stop there. But that's to make Peter's mistake and not listen through to the end, not hear the part about the resurrection.

Jane's daughter was here for a few days last week and the three of us went to lunch. Liz was telling us about a new book she was reading, titled, *IRRESISTIBLE*. The author's central question was why a faith that was totally irresistible in the early church had become so easily resistible now. His answer (although I haven't read it completely) is that we've lost our grounding in the two things that matter the most: the resurrection and that final commandment Jesus gave to his disciples to love one another.

Those two things can not only anchor us but also empower us to build the kind of community and society God intended and that people will, once again find irresistible.

I'd like to end with a story that I asked Carol Ann to put in the enews, because I know not everyone watching this gets that. It's a story about feet and about suffering and about love. It was in a news article sent to me by my daughter in upstate NY, Potsdam to be exact. Potsdam which is a small, white community had a demonstration to support the BLM movement, and their little local paper wrote about it. A resident of the area sent a copy of the article to an African-American man who is in prison here in Waupun, Wisconsin. The man in the cell next to him was a neo-Nazi who spent hours every day in racial tirades. At one point he said that if anyone could give him evidence that white, rural Americans cared one bit about black lives, he'd shut up for a month. When the article turned up, the recipient read it and, true to his word, the Neo-Nazi was quiet for a month.

During that month, they had many conversations about discrimination and the fear that supported it. By the end of the month, the Neo-Nazi had renounced his membership in that group and joined the Love Over Hate study group the African American had started for the prisoners.

It's all there, really: suffering, but suffering overcome, feet in the form of both grounding and commitment and, best of all, resurrection.

Praise God.

Amen.

