

Fr. Molison's Sermon

Proper 17-A; Pentecost 16
August 30-31, 2008
Matthew 16:21-27 – “Discipleship”

Some years ago, there appeared in an Ann Lander's column an interesting little note:

Dear Ann Landers: Ask your readers to think about this for a moment: You have a plain bar of iron that is worth about \$10. Now, if this bar was made into a horseshoe, it would be worth about \$25; made into screwdrivers, it is worth about \$35. And made into needles, this bar is worth about \$7,000.

I invite you to ponder the implications of what I just read, for I will return to this note later. See if you can anticipate why I shared this note to Ann Landers with you.

A television commercial of a few years ago that many of us may have seen, shows a man in a kayak going over a waterfall. He is screaming all the way to the bottom, bouncing off rocks and along the canyon wall before hitting the water below. The camera then pans to a couple standing by their go-anywhere, climb-every mountain, cross any river sport utility vehicle, who witnessed this strange sight. The fellow turns to his female companion, shakes his head in utter disbelief and says, “What was he thinking?”

It is quite conceivable that Peter, our hero in last week's story, may have been asking himself this same question of Jesus when Jesus stated that he must suffer many things at the hands of the chief priests and scribes, be killed, and on the third day be raised from the dead.

Jesus and the disciples with him were still in the far north-eastern part of Israel, in the village of Caesarea-Philippi. It is upon near-by Mt. Hermon, Israel's highest mountain, the transfiguration of Jesus occurred. Thus, Caesarea-Philippi is an important location for Christian believers, not only because of the Transfiguration, but also it is this place, the farthest from Jerusalem and yet remain

inside Israel, that Jesus chose to begin the preparation of the disciples for his death upon the cross. It is from here that Jesus first tells his disciples that he must suffer the horrors of a crucifixion.

It is to this announcement of Jesus that Peter wondered what on earth our Lord was thinking. He took Jesus aside away from the rest of the group, rebuked, scolded and hauled Jesus over the coals, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you!"

Peter, lovable impulsive Peter, who last week was our hero because we thought that his response to Jesus' question revealed some understanding of who Jesus truly is. And then this week, our hero's balloon burst.

And we cannot fully blame Peter for his thinking. I believe that most of us are guilty of this same type of thinking. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus, all-powerful, omnipotent, to suffer at the hands of the Jews and be put to death? This can't be! Jesus talked to his disciples about establishing a kingdom. He shared that this world of the enslaved Jews would come to a glorious end. He told his disciples that they would share in this kingdom. The disciples interpreted Jesus' sayings that there would be a kingdom, and that in this kingdom, there would be power and supremacy for Jesus *and for themselves*. They envision that Jesus was going to be their king, kicking out the Roman Empire, and set the Jews straight about God!

In this his first attempt to have the disciples understand that he must suffer and die on the cross, Jesus burst their hope of glory in this world, a message they were not ready for, especially Peter. He and the others did not understand that if Jesus does not suffer and die, and rise again, there will, indeed, *be no kingdom*.

And by so denying what Christ is telling them, they are denying Christ and are in the way of God's plan. Jesus was sent to earth for two reasons: (1) to seek and save the lost, which Jesus told them back n Chapter 9:13, and (2) to give His life as a ransom for many, which they will learn again in chapter 20:28.

It is interesting to note that the Jewish leaders resisted the first goal – to seek and save the lost - and the disciples resisted in accepting the second – to give his life as a ransom for many. Thus, at this point in their relationship with Jesus, hard lessons are being taught. Jesus was setting, once again, new paradigms, setting new parameters of thought, ones the disciples, especially Peter, were not prepared for. Jesus' route to His kingdom, to his power, and to his supremacy is a radical departure from that of his disciples' understanding. The cross is a symbol of death, shame and weakness. The cross symbolizes total commitment – even to death. Thus the cross is not on their agenda. They are offended and, in their minds, must set the record straight.

Our own human nature sides with that of the disciples. We are a culture of winners. Just look at our attitude toward the Buffalo Bills. If they have a winning season, the stadium is packed; have a losing season and ticket sales drop through the basement. What happened to the faith and fan support the team thought was there? No different with Jesus. They were proponents of the idea that one wins by winning. Jesus is teaching that to inherit God's kingdom, one wins by losing! Talk about a paradigm shift!

In verse 24, Jesus tells his disciples that “If a man would come after him, let him deny himself (the New English Version states “to leave self behind”) and take his cross and follow me.” Notice that Jesus starts with the words, “**If** a man would come after me...” What is required of anyone to follow Jesus is that their first must be a desire, there must be a longing, a yearning. There can be no perseverance of Christ with out a desire, a longing for him. Remember the Beatitude that states, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness.” They who do not hunger cannot be filled.

The disciples were hearing Jesus say that only by self-sacrifice, by denial of self, they would inherit the kingdom. Jesus' reaction to Peter is not one of scorn or ridicule, but rather one of tough love, tough grace, for it reveals and exposes a cheap faith that the disciples and we buy into. Peter and the crew thought that Jesus,

alone, all by himself, was going to establish the kingdom. All they had to do was to be loyal in following him, and they would become part of the king's court and rule with Jesus. Were they ever surprised!

Many of us also hold to a cheap brand of Christianity, where in our worship, we fall short of what God requires: asking forgiveness without repentance; fellowship without a common confession of faith. If someone were to ask what you believe, would you be able to answer, and would that answer basically be the same for all members of this Body of Christ? Are we saying that we are members of this body of Christ, yet lead a life that denies him by hindering the teaching of Christ as Peter attempted to do? Cheap Christianity is a faith that lives apart from the Word of God. Cheap faith looks for the easy way out.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred by the Germans just before the end of World War II, wrote, "Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance; baptism without church discipline; communion without confession (of the faith to the world)... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus, the Christ."

For many today, the basic tenants of Christianity are so watered down, made into something so simple and without meaning, that totally lost is the understanding of what it truly means to follow Christ. We have taken for granted God's total and complete love for us. Does it really mean anything that God sent His only Son into the world to die a horrible death for our sins so that we can have eternal life? Does it mean anything that Jesus called us to live the same self-sacrificing life style he set for us, that we are to live a life that reflects the same kind of love, compassion and concern Jesus has for all of us? Does any of this mean anything?

Jesus is giving us a challenge to live a life style that is not centered on self, nor on the world, but on a life given over to Jesus and to the obedience of his commandments. He requires us to live a life that is willing to sacrifice something of ourselves, some priorities, some

worldly values, some creature comforts, some of our time, ten percent of our money, some of what we treasure, so that we might serve our Lord and others around us.

School begins this coming week. Would any of us wish to see a child stuck in kindergarten year after year, especially our own child? I don't think so. Our expectation is that a child annually will move into the next grade level, even though it is a given that the expectations and responsibility for success increases with each grade level. And yet, when it comes to our Christian faith, many of us are stuck in kindergarten where it is comfortable and convenient. Expectations we place on others, we avoid for ourselves. We expect others to change their lives, yet are not willing to change our own for Christ. This is cheap grace.

The reading from Paul's letter to the Romans calls us to build up the body of Christ, and it starts right here by building up this body of Christ known as St. Bartholomew's. The question we need to address is, "Do we wish to see this body of Christ grow?" To answer "Yes" means that all of us, individually and collectively, are to take up the cross of Jesus. As the way of the cross did not come cheaply, nor will the growth of this church. Without the cross, without the love for Jesus in our hearts, without the commitment of discipleship, then Jesus will say to us what he said to Peter, "You are a hindrance to me, for you are not on the side of God, but of men." Putting the world and ourselves first, we will fail. St. Bartholomew's will fail, fail our Lord, and fail those to whom God has sent us to bring into his fold.

On Pentecost, the disciples learned what it meant to place God first in their lives. And the faith grew miraculously. Let us learn from Jesus and from his disciples. We cannot play games with God's love. All of us have gifts that God has given us. Not to use these gifts for the giving and spreading of his kingdom, and yet expect God to give us his gift of salvation, is cheap grace, one that God will not deliver, but rather will withhold.

No part of the human body is without a specific function. Now, let that statement settle for a moment. No part of the human body is

without a specific purpose, a specific function. And now apply this truth to Paul's body of Christ. No member of the body of Christ is without a function, a purpose for being a member of it. The Lord, our creator, has given to each a place in the body of Christ. To each is given work to do; service to offer. Now, more than any other time in the history of **this** body of Christ, we are called upon to bear fruit for the Lord.

For over a generation, the Holy Spirit steadily led this body of Christ to and prepared us for this point in time. The immediate and future challenges that face this body of Christ are daunting indeed. We will be asked to make decisions that never in our wildest dreams did we ever anticipate having to make. Making the right decision is never easy. And once a challenging decision is made, successful achievement of that decision rests upon the entire body of Christ. Meeting the needs of what is required to achieve the goals of decisions made means drawing upon the vast variety of gifts and talents within this body of Christ. St. Paul states that we, indeed, do have the gifts required to meet our needs as a community of the faithful. What also is required is not cheap grace, but commitment, commitment to sacrifice time, talent, and, yes, your treasure.

Remember the bar of iron from the note to Ann Landers? Left untouched, left unimproved, the bar of iron was worth approximately what? \$10. Yet, when that same bar was changed, lost its self identity, becoming more useful, such as being made into needles, its worth, its value increased thousands fold to approximately what? \$7,000.

The same is true of another kind of material – you. Your value to Christ is determined by what you decide to make of yourself – not for the world, but what you make of yourself for Jesus, and for this body of Christ.