

Lent 2B 2021 Sermon

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

In our Prayer Book's Ash Wednesday service, the Celebrant always begins the Season of Lent with these words: "I invite you... in the name of the Church to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word." (p. 265)

The first thing mentioned is *self-examination*. Lent is the Church's time set apart for looking closely, and with unflinching honesty, at our own lives; our *true* wants and desires; our hearts and souls. In the 5th Century B.C., Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." The theme in our Lenten Devotional Booklet this past week has been "Listening to Ourselves." Listening to our thoughts, our desires and motivations, our emotions, our souls, our bodies. Self-examination.

How are we living out our Christian faith in our daily lives? When we look inside ourselves, do we find fear, anger, frustration, self-righteousness, animosity, selfishness, partisanship? Or do we find compassion, generosity, a willingness to put our neighbor's needs above our own?

What have we learned and how have we spiritually grown this past year, a year which many people have seen as one, long, extended Lent? If we have not already done so, can we take **this** Lenten season to examine what we have learned and how we have grown (or not!) over these past 12 months?

In our Gospel lesson today, we read that, in response to Jesus' saying that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, rejection, and execution, Peter *rebukes* Jesus. Now, if Peter had been listening to his own life at that time, what would he have discovered inside himself? Anger? Fear? Betrayal?

But if Peter were able to step *outside* himself for a moment, and listen to himself *rebuking* Jesus, he would have realized something else: He had just switched roles with Jesus. A Master rebukes his disciples; **not** the other way around. In rebuking Jesus, Peter has, unconsciously, assumed the role of Master: someone who is wiser than Jesus; who knows better than Jesus does.

And, my friends, when I examine myself with unflinching honesty – my motivations, feelings, thoughts, and actions – I find that I, too, can often, unconsciously, think and act as if I know better than Jesus. I know what Jesus says about turning the other cheek, loving my enemies, loving my neighbor as myself, giving up all worries about tomorrow, not judging others, denying myself and taking up my cross. As our Gospel today puts it, Jesus “said all this quite openly.” I **know**, in my *mind*, what Jesus taught and modeled in his own life.

But my inner Peter, my unconscious self, doesn’t *want* to hear those things that Jesus taught, or take them seriously. So I tell myself (again, unconsciously) that Jesus really doesn’t understand **my** situation; doesn’t understand the world **I** have to live in:

In 21st-Century America, Jesus, you *can’t* turn the other cheek – you’ll get pummeled! And I have the right to protect myself! And if I didn’t worry about tomorrow, I’d never get anything done. And not judging others? I’m not passing *judgment* on that other person; I’m just stating facts. That person is wrong. Or he’s lazy. Or he’s a member of that *other* political party, and therefore is someone I **must** oppose. He’s the enemy, and, let’s be realistic, Jesus, there’s no way I’m going to love him. You see, Jesus, you’re a bit naïve when it comes to the way the world works in our technological, capitalist economy in 21st-Century America.

And Jesus turns and rebukes me, saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Last week, in my sermon on Jesus’ temptation, I mentioned John Shea’s understanding of “Satan:” “The mythological character of Satan...,” Shea writes, “[symbolizes] the inner, invisible energy of people, groups, and social and political structures that... actively keep people alienated from God and divided among themselves.”¹

Now, if there is an inner, invisible energy that actively keeps people *alienated* from God and *divided* among themselves, there is also an inner, invisible energy that actively keeps people at *one* with God and with each other. The various manifestations of **this** inner, *unitive* energy have been called “love,” “Spirit,” “forgiveness,” “grace” – or any number of similar terms.

And so, in our Lenten self-examination, it would be very helpful if we were to pay close attention to the **energies** within ourselves. Feel the energies; discern

the quality of the energies; name them. Are they *alienating* and *divisive* energies, manifesting in emotions and attitudes such as hatred, anger, resentment, selfishness, partisanship? Or are they *unitive* energies, manifesting in emotions and attitudes such as compassion, empathy, love, generosity, and oneness with God, each other, and all Creation? Which energy we find within ourselves tells us whether we have set our minds on “human things or divine things.”

Eckhart Tolle suggests one possible exercise we might use in our self-examination: “Observe the attachment to your views and opinions,” he writes. “Feel the mental-emotional energy behind your need to be right and make the other person wrong. That’s the energy of the egoic mind.”² The *separate* mind; the mind which divides and alienates; the mind set on “human things.” When Peter rebukes Jesus, Jesus undoubtedly feels the alienating energies *behind* the rebuke. It is those inner, invisible, alienating energies that Jesus identifies as “Satan” speaking through Peter.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” In my Lenten self-examination, then, I must begin by asking myself, “Do I really *want* to be a follower of Jesus? Or do I just *identify* as a ‘Christian’ because it makes me feel righteous, or safe, or holy, or even patriotic? Do I have the *courage* to **follow** Jesus? We know, after all, that Peter, who will later tell Jesus, “Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will,” (Mark 14:29, NLT2) this same Peter, when the heat is on, will lack the courage. He will deny Jesus 3 times.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny *themselves*. Biblical scholar Dawn Wilhelm writes, “To *deny oneself* is to place **Jesus’** priorities, purposes, and path ahead of our own; to *take up the cross* is to be willing to suffer the consequences of faithful living; to *follow him* is to travel to unknown destinations that promise to be both dangerous and life-giving.”³ One young minister once told her friend that she felt God was asking her to stand up for an unpopular cause in her area, but she just couldn’t work up the courage, because she was afraid it would result in her congregation firing her. She told her friend, “I believe in dying for a cause, just not this young.” We know that members of Congress can find themselves struggling between what they feel in their hearts is **right** and what their political party’s position is on the matter. I don’t need to tell you which choice almost always wins out.

Do we really *want* to be followers of Jesus?

The answer lies within ourselves. And Lent is the perfect time to discover what is there.

AMEN

- 1 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 80
- 2 Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual enlightenment* (p. 215, p. 26)). New World Library. Kindle Edition.
- 3 *Preaching the Gospel of Mark*, quoted in *The Christian Century*, Feb. 22, 2012 issue, Phyllis Kersten, "Living by the Word,"
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-02/sunday-march-4-2012>