

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, September 3, 2023

The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The rev. Matthew Moretz, Vicar and Chief Operating Officer

on

Matthew 16:21-28

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Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

I remember the day I made my first Communion, as a child, very well. The needlepoint cushion, the shining brass of the altar rail. The texture of the wafer. And yet, when it came to wine, I was so taken aback. Although it shone like a jewel in the sun, I didn't expect the wine to taste like that at all. I think I expected something sweet like soda. Not something that would make me wince at the taste. And I certainly didn't expect this divine cream sherry to have this burning sensation on the way down. I do believe that if I hadn't been raised to be reverent in church, that I very well might have spit out my First Communion!

When we don't get what we expect out of something, isn't that the impulse? To dismiss it. Or maybe even to be disgusted. And what about when we don't get what we expect out of people? When a friend doesn't do what we expect them to do in our time of need. When a leader doesn't perform as they promised. When a partner falls short. When a child or a parent goes off the course we had in mind. It's not just about our expectations, but something more powerful than that. It's about our hope, managing and protecting this central and tender thing, even when it is battered and dashed.

We all have these core hopes, guiding us through the choppy waters of our lives like some of the stars of the sky did for sailors of old. Some have whole constellations of hope to be their guide. And we all can remember a time when one of those hopes faltered or maybe even just fell from the sky in an instant.

I know it's not a news flash that the world is disappointing. But what I think is often news for us is that God is disappointing. By that, I mean that if we follow God as we know God in Christ, God won't necessarily do what we expect or hope. In the Gospels, God didn't play to type. God didn't live up to all the ancient expectations of God and the divine that still haunt our world.

And on a deep level, I believe it is fair to say that God will let us down. By that I mean our first hopes. But this is never the end point. The first hopes will be replaced by a new hope. So much of the witness of the Church is about sharing in the sometimes scouring experience that is part and parcel of getting from Hope A to Hope B.

The Gospels are so brisk in pace that it would be easy to move quickly past the epic disappointment that Peter is going through in today's Gospel reading, when his teacher starts talking about what is next: that Jesus and they must go to Jerusalem. And that there Jesus must undergo great suffering, the kind of suffering that no one would wish on their worst enemy. And then in Jerusalem he will die an ignominious death. And on the third day he will be raised up by God.

Just before this, as we read from the Gospel last week, Peter seems to be the valedictorian of the disciples by being the first to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of the Living God. But even though Jesus is encouraging to Peter, he sternly orders them not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. And I can understand why. The hope that they have, and the hope that Jesus offers, talks the same talk (using words like Messiah, God, and salvation), but doesn't walk the same walk. And I think this is why Jesus did not want the disciples to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Not because he wasn't the Messiah. But because I think he knew that the kind of Messiah that he was going to be was not the kind that they would recognize, at least at first glance.

Jesus was right, because once he started mapping out what his path was going to look like, it would be his star pupil who would try to talk him out of it. "This wasn't how Messiah's behaved!" the common sense went. "Messiah's don't get incarcerated and tortured. Messiah's don't get killed and publicly humiliated. Messiah's were winners. Not losers." And what Jesus is talking about looks like the personification of losing. And so Peter rebukes Him.

It is at this that Jesus uses the strongest language with Peter. "Get thee behind me, Satan!" And it is here that you wonder if Peter and Jesus' relationship can survive. How long would any friendship last if this were said? But I believe Jesus said this, not to stigmatize Peter or cast him out, but to snap him out of his confusion. I think the severity of the language matches how severely troubled Jesus must be at this point. And well-meaning Peter is tempting him to follow after earthly power and glory in the same way that Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness at the start of his ministry.

But there is a reality that Jesus is living into that is bigger than his own power and even his own safety. Jesus was going to show forth the beauty and wisdom of God, even after setting off cultural and political trip wires that would lead to his death. He would risk being misunderstood by everyone. He would risk being accused as a blasphemer. He would risk losing his best friends, like Peter, too. He would go to places, places of despair, where people thought God was absent and he would show forth God present and loving and even merciful. He would prove to defeat death by living in and through and beyond it, never dancing to death's grim tune.

What is it about Peter that has him sticking with Jesus? Even after being called Satan? Even after Jesus goes on to say "take up your cross and follow me." Wouldn't that have you running out the door? Instead, Peter would keep following his Lord, sometimes at a distance, sometimes hiding out, but still following. What kept him following?

Can we have Peter's "stickiness," too? For every Christian's path is full of instances where our hope must be corrected and reformed. Our life is never the life we signed up for. We are let down by the falsehood of the world, but sometimes we are let down by the Truth of God's Creation. But if we stick with it, we can discover that God's hope is always bigger than our first hopes.

But getting to that new hope involves weathering times of disappointment. And this demands sticking with God, and with the unfolding Truth, and with each other through all the changes and chances of life, sometimes through the collapses of hope and even collapses of meaning. This new hope demands holding on for dear life through some of the worst that the world can throw our way. And then, after the storm, discovering the life that lives on the other side of it.

This is why it is so important that Peter listens to him when he says "Take up your cross and follow me" and that he ultimately sticks with Jesus through the valley of the shadow of death. Because the cross that Peter can't stand to think about at first, as ugly and as heartbreaking as it is, the cross in all its countless forms, is not our end. It is our beginning, a beginning that we would never have chosen. It is the beginning of a kind of life that truly lasts: a life we call Resurrection.

The first time I took communion, when I tasted the wine, I felt it burn as it went down. But, luckily, I didn't spit it out. Actually, it was not burning me, but warming me, and I just had to wait a while to figure out the new life that it would be for me. May we, like Peter, stick with our Lord, come what may, so that we too might have a new hope, and a new spirit.