

Homily 16th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19
Christ Episcopal Church
Towanda, Pa
Rev. Betsy Welliver Sentigar

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If anyone want to become 1 my followers, let them deny themselves and take their cross and follow me.”

These words of Jesus seem like a harsh condition of Christian discipleship. He makes it clear that it is our OWN cross we are to take up in order to follow him. How can we , in our wildest imagination conceive a desire to take part in this journey with Christ?

Professor William Barclay(1907-1978) point to the startling honesty of Jesus. No one can say that they were induced to follow Jesus under false pretenses. There were no bribes nor an easy way. In his brutal honesty communicating to the disciples, he was indicating that they must be ready to be regarded as criminals and be ready to die¹, hardly an enticing endeavor!

Jesus’ challenge was however, to waken women and men to the boldness and moral courage in their own souls, by the offer of a way which says no

¹ William Barclay The Gospel of Mark - The New Daily Study Bible, pg 233-234

to self and yes to Christ. We must say no to our own natural love of ease and comfort. We must say no to every course of action based on self-seeking and self-will. ²

Reflecting on this brings me to think of modern day martyrs. It is this very weekend that I celebrate my brother's birthday which now happens to fall on the day of remembrance of 9/11. Now twenty years out, our beloved Presiding Bishop offered us a remembrance in his pastoral letter this past week:

As followers of Jesus, and with our siblings in other faith traditions, we place great value on the act of remembrance. As we reflect on the solemn anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, we remember many loved ones lost and first responders who put their lives at risk, modeling the sacrificial love of Jesus, who said: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

While 20 years have passed, [we need] to pause and remember the days that followed these tragic events. There was a moment in the aftermath when people came together. We were praying, grieving, and also working together. Because in that moment, however fleeting it was, we knew with immediacy and vulnerability that we need God, and we need each other.

² *Ibid.* pg. 235

Although it was uncomfortable, I pressed myself to listen to family stories of navigating grief. These families had lost loved ones on flight 93. Many of you may have watched remembrances of 9/11 offered to us this weekend. The images and stories are poignant and powerful - reminders of the fragility of life and the preciousness that life holds for each and everyone.

In all this, we can be overcome with a sense of futility and uselessness in our smallness. As one theologian puts it, “we can’t get the ocean into a thimble, but we can dip a thimble into the ocean. In a moment of recognition, we are that thimble. So, here then it is in God, that we live and move and have our being.”³

Bishop Curry goes on: There was a moment in the aftermath when people came together. We were praying, grieving, and also working together.

³ Jim Finely, Turning to the Mystics - Sink into the Tap Root of your Heart 3/23/20

Because in that moment, however fleeting it was, we knew with immediacy and vulnerability that we need God, and we need each other.

I remember a little more that a year ago that a bus full of employees from the hospital that I work at, left their day jobs for many weeks to attend the crisis surge of the Pandemic in NYC. Doctors, nurses, and specialists availed themselves, pre-vaccine, to the worst medical crisis in the densely ravaged ICU's in NYC. They brought their time and their skills, leaving their families and routines, in order to bring assistance in the surge of CoVid where there was scarcity of ventilators and staff. Tears rolled down my eyes as the bus departed - for them into an unknown future.

We are experiencing an unprecedented breakdown of structures that we know and are familiar with. Most all people I know are stymied by their confusion of what is real, where truth resides, the global experience of disasters, and their profound uncertainty.

Taking up our cross and following Christ includes us following the most important commandment and message to love God with all our heart, all

our mind as well as to love our neighbors “as ourselves”. This is not to say “as well as ourselves” but others as if we are them..

As I have experienced this, what I have come to recognize is that taking up one’s cross has to do with intention of Christian formation and dedicated spiritual practice. In this, I find, personal as well as communal efforts to follow prayer practices enable the compassionate Christ to open up space in our hearts and minds to respond a hurting world. One of the great teachers for me has been Fr. Martin Smith. Over the pandemic he has offered a series on hope which I began to offer you last week: I continue to quote from his series on hope:

Faith in Maine - Hope and Jesus Proclamation of the reign of God -

Session 2 Martin Smith⁴

In this time of Pandemic and uncertainty let me speak again today of

hope. Our social turmoil finds the church having to improvise its

witness leaving us spinning round and round losing all sense of

direction. It is in this time that I have landed before you. In these

⁴ Faith in Main Podcast - Episcopal Diocese of Main June 22, 2020 Proclamation of the Reign of God. Fr. Martin Smith.

circumstances reading scripture is no mere devotional practice or means of study, we seriously needs its message to “Re-boot” our consciousness” as we reset our bearings, priority must be given to explore the original gospel accounts of Jesus’ actual readings and teachings. Marks gospel is the closest chronologically to Jesus’ life and is explored through Peter. We need to seek the gift of hope. The actual word “hope” seldom occurs in Jesus’ message. The reason is, the hope is not an ingredient of his message, hope is its thrust, its entire orientation. The core of his message is the arrival of God’s reign in arriving in the here and now. People believed that God’s sovereignty and his arrival in the world would finally be actualized and take place in the future. Its coming would have to await the Messiah or the ultimate resurrection of the dead and final judgement depending on the type of Judaism you subscribed to.

What made news was that Jesus the prophet of Nazareth dared to proclaim that the approach of the reign of God, instead of being deferred to the end of days, was now taking place and that He was its catalyst. He was God’s representative whose acts of forgiveness, liberation and healing were the proof that God’s reign was gaining a

foothold. Wherever he and his entourage went became ground zero for the reign of God to kick in. But if it is in the Spirit of God that casts out demons, then the Sprit of God has come to you (Matthew 12;28). With this onset, the deadly grip of the satanic on God's kingdom was being pried loose. I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning, Jesus proclaimed when those he had sent out to message Galilee reported to him (Luke 10:17).

You've heard a gospel term that Jesus teaches that the kingdom of God is within you. That is the King James translation of Luke 12;21 and it has been often used to claim that the core of the teaching is an inner transformation, the obedience of the individual soul to its maker. But the greek translation "within; and the Aramaic meaning behind it also means "among". The NRSV interprets this correctly. When the Pharisees asked Jesus when the Kingdom of God was coming, Jesus explained that the Kingdom will not come with things that can be observed, nor will they say here it is or there it is, for in fact the Kingdom of God is among you. For in fact the reign of God takes hold of the fabric of our life and changes it, but it does not materialize in a massive historical change or political revolution

engulfing society for all to see. Its transformation begins with small beginnings so that Jesus compares it to a small mustard seed that will gradually grow into a tree, or yeast that will rise once the baker mixes it into the dough, that given time will swell the whole batch. The reign of God once taking care in his Jesus's eclectic community of misfits and riff raft which Jesus called his little flock to whom God was pleased to entrust his reign. Women were prominent in it and children held a place of unprecedented honor. It was no coincidence that those in society once marked as “against the pale” were gained entry into the reign, tax collectors, prostitutes. As they could hear God’s reign brought amnesty and forgiveness.; a new beginning and acceptance that removed them from stigma. No longer were they burden of their past. They were the first to claim a new identity and enjoy the gif of a new equality and dignity as pioneers of a new order the like which had ever been seen before. It was this radical new amnesty for suspect people that Jesus provocatively offered in parables like the Prodigal Son in which he put into practice the forgiveness of sins , a prerogative which by definition belonged exclusively to God. Frederica Tompsett has coined a beautiful phrase

:Living under the Authority of the Future”. This expressed perfectly the Spirit and Essence of Jesus’ message of the new reign of God. Religion is typically in the grip of precedent and tradition. It demands conformity to the dictates of the past. Jesus announcement that the future of God is taking hold of the fractured present whose injustices and sufferings lure so many into hopelessness and resignation , or to the futility's of violent insurrection mean that hope was indeed possible. To enter into the reign then, assists us into putting ourselves under the authority of God’s future, setting our mindsets and hearts in the complete turn around. The greek word for this is metanoia and usually translated as repentance. To enter the narrow gate that leads to life meant to enter into the realm of hope, pregnant with new possibilities of life, with the precedented quality of life grounded in equality, compassion and authentic holiness. The invitation from now on to live under the authority of God’s future is what underlies Jesus underlying daring claim to undermine the rules of society. For example, “You have heard it said and eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth... but I say if anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other one also and offer it. You have also heard love your

neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of God in heaven who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good (Matthew 5 verses)

Acting under the authority of God's future, Jesus gave advance notice of the radical changes that our community's would undergo when the actual reign of God took hold. The dispossessed and powerless would finally enter into their own and finally gain the decent livelihood that they would need to flourish.

Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the land

Blessed are you who are hungry now for you will be filled

Conversely the reign of God would strip away once and for all the dominance and privilege of the rich who everywhere monopolize power and resources.

Whoa to you who are rich for you have received your consolation.

Whoa to you now who are laughing for you will mourn and weep (Luke 6:25)

Only re-exposure to the radicalism of Jesus own good news to the onset of God's reign will give us a true sense what it means to share God's hope.

Seeking God's hope is first seeking first the reign of God and its setting things to right. It is the willingness to live under the authority of God's future and to start practicing in advance the sharing the gift of God's , nonviolence compassion through which the God of absolute love rules.

We are in a teaching moment of the healing of our fears. Memories of that tender cooperation—of love for each other as neighbors—serve as guiding lights for the present. Amidst the ongoing pandemic and natural disasters that have taken so many lives and pushed first responders to their limits, and amidst a worldwide reckoning with [disparate views] we are called to become the Beloved Community whose way of life is the way of Jesus and his way of love.⁵

My final image for you is the night sky over the memorial for the Twin Towers. The light that is emitted from this sight. To me it sends the untimate message from John's Gospel. "Light shines in the Darkness and the darkness will never overcome it". Stay in the reign and light of prayer of hope and in Jesus. All this I ask in his name. Amen.

⁵ Bishop Michael Curry - Pastoral Letter Sept 8, 2021