

September 3, 2017
Pentecost 13
Take Up Your Cross
Jeremiah 15:15-21; Psalm 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28
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Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
Gracia y paz del Dio, Padre, Hijo e Espiritu Santo
Grace and peace to you from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

How many times have you uttered the words “God forbid!” when confronted by personal or community or national tragedies. September 11, 2001 was a day when many of us cried out God forbid! The devastation, death and destruction of that day shattered our collective sense of security and safety.

People in this country and around the world entered a period of communal mourning that quickly turned to anger and a cry for vengeance. How many of us cried out “God forbid!” when we heard of the massacre of little children in Sandyhook Elementary School? That tragedy was followed by fierce debate about the easy availability of high powered weapons.

Recently we have been confronted with images of the devastating flooding in the wake of Hurricane Harvey; hazy, ash-filled skies from uncontrolled wildfires across Oregon; uncertainty on the minds of our immigrant sisters and brothers; and countless other natural and human caused disasters.

We long for, we pray for peace and tranquility in our world and in our community. Our capacity for compassion is nearly exhausted. We lament the state of our world.

Today’s texts give voice to our lament. Jeremiah the defamed prophet of Israel laments his unsavory task of warning the Israelites that their temple city of Jerusalem will be destroyed and they will be taken captive by the Babylonians at the command of King Nebuchadnezzar. Weary of the Israelite’s lack of response to prophetic warning he complains to God about his fate and that of the nation of Israel.

“I’ve done everything you asked of me” he says to God; You called me, I came. You gave me the words to say, I was happy to speak on your behalf. But people make fun of me because of what you have me say to them. I don’t hang out with merrymakers. I sit alone, filled with YOUR words of warning, God. You have deceived me. You led me to believe you would rescue Israel. And that hasn’t happened.”

Psalm 26 echoes Jeremiah’s lament: Vindicate me Oh God! I don’t sit with the wicked. I love the house in which you dwell. So, don’t sweep me away with sinners. And Peter . . . wonderfully human Peter, is scandalized by Jesus’ prediction of his suffering and death He says to Jesus, “God forbid it, Lord! This suffering and death must never happen to you!”

Peter’s response is more than personal horror at losing his master and teacher. Peter is speaking on behalf of all of the disciples, not in belligerence, but in a collective lament, stunned at the possibility that the king they had envisioned would triumphantly defeat the oppressive Roman government would instead be captured, tortured and murdered by that government.

This is NOT the image of the promised King of Israel that the disciples expected. Israel hoped for a King who would free them with might and power . . . but it was might and power on their terms. Following the devastation of September 2001, our collective conscious called out for revenge. Bring in someone who could avenge the loss of innocent life. Go to war to root out the evil behind this brutal attack on “our country”.

And Jesus says to Peter these very harsh words “Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block. You have set your mind on earthly things” Peter, who Jesus just named the foundation of the church . . . the one to whom Jesus just gave the office of the keys . . . the power to bind and loose all things on earth . . . Jesus calls Peter Satan, a stumbling block

Think back to the early verses of the gospel of Matthew . . . after his baptism Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days. There he was tempted by the evil one . . . tempted to take the easy way out of this Messiah gig. And Jesus said the same words to the evil one: “get behind me Satan”. This is not the way of the cross. The way of the cross, the way of discipleship, the way of Jesus is not easy. We followers of Jesus are called to a different way of living. A way of living that is astonishingly contrary to our egocentric culture.

Self-denial is not in the lexicon of our society. Some of you will remember the 1960s mantra “If it feels good, do it”? That has devolved into the current life-style that says “you can have it all” “you DESERVE it all!” Jesus calls us out of this self-indulgence, outside of our self-interest. He says that in order to be disciples we have to deny self, take up HIS cross and follow him. So, let me get this straight, Jesus . . . I have to give up my house, my car, my family, EVERYTHING in order to be good enough for you? NO! Jesus is not asking for “things”. Jesus is demanding a complete reorientation of priorities.

Taking up the cross is to put aside our self-importance, give up our privilege and walk with the powerless, the despised, the one who hasn't learned English. Taking up the cross is to stand next to our threatened neighbor whether she is homosexual, black, Mexican, Muslim or disabled. Taking up the cross is to understand that being a disciple is not about ME! It is about the glory of the cross on which Jesus was raised up for all to see as the true king! The king who gave his life for the sake of the world. The king whose triumph was his glorious resurrection. Jesus demands that we take up the cross of compassion, NOT to prove how good and righteous WE are but to show the world how good and righteous JESUS is. At the very center of the cross community are compassionate servants.

Look around you . . . outside of the walls of this place, outside of the walls of your home . . . who is in need? What is their need? Who is hungry, who is thirsty, who is alone. We are called to fill those needs, not for the sake of service but for the sake of the gospel. Not for the sake of our own salvation, that has already been accomplished, but for the sake of the world that is desperately seeking salvation.

Calamitous events throughout the world weigh heavily on us. Political confrontations in this country strain relationships. Divisive and demeaning language and actions tear down communities. These are the stumbling blocks in the path of our discipleship. Only with our eyes focused on the cross of Jesus Christ can we see the deep needs of our neighbors. With our eyes focused on the cross of Jesus Christ we see the divine things that God has revealed, through Jesus Christ. In the end, it is God who will avenge the unrighteous of this world. Our job as disciples is to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

We come to this table as a community of disciples. Here we are nourished for the journey by the body and blood of the crucified and risen Savior. Here we are made disciples of Jesus Christ not for our glory but to the glory of God.

Out of our lament comes action blessed by God. Actions that point to the glory of the cross, the cross of Jesus' suffering and death and beyond the cross to his glorious resurrection and the promise of life eternal. In the meantime we live, as Paul tells us in Romans “doing what is right and good for ALL”.

There is a Greek word μαρτυριον which means both martyr and witness. Discipleship is to martyr, or give up, the self in order to be a witness, one who testifies to the gospel. Discipleship is both martyrdom and witness.

Go, beloved children of God, disciples of Jesus. Be martyred witnesses to the cross of Christ.

Thanks be to God.