

## **Comfort In Community**

Mark 8:27-38

September 13, 2009

### **I.**

A lot is happening today. Among other things it is National Back to Church Sunday, the culmination of a campaign begun by an outreach organization in California to encourage people to come to church for the first time, or to come back if they have been away for a while.

It's also our own Bring a Friend to Church Sunday here at St. Thomas, which is a similar effort we have been making on the second Sunday of each month by inviting people to join us. And so, on both counts we again welcome our visitors.

But there's more. Sunday School also starts today, and perhaps most importantly we're going to baptize Katey Lynn Smith and welcome her to the Body of Christ and our Church community.

And so I can look out over you all and imagine that some of us might be here for different reasons. For Katey Lynn and her family we know this is a memorable day.

And for others among us, perhaps God has blessed us and we're here to give thanks. Or perhaps we're here for reasons described in the classic lyrics from Simon and Garfunkel. We're empty and aching and we don't know why. Or maybe we're somewhere in between. And so we come to search for truth, or to dispel doubts, or simply to know God again, or for the first time.

And perhaps a few of you are here under a little duress. You're here because someone in your family, or a friend, prevailed upon you to come, and if the truth be told you would rather be somewhere else, doing something different.

But for those who had doubts or were reluctant, the fact that you decided to be here says something. Perhaps it says that deep within your spirit you want to draw closer to God. Perhaps you want to believe that all this religion business is not just a lot of foolishness and you hope that God will do something reassuring.

And finally, many of us are here because we're always here. This is our home. We're here whenever the doors are open for worship. And we want once again to experience God and his only Son, to receive the love he offers, and to share that love with others. We come to pray and worship, or perhaps for some quiet time, or to seek peace from the burdens of the world.

### **II.**

And so, with those comforting possibilities as background, what actually is happening here today? What did we hear Jesus say to Peter and the disciples in today's Gospel reading? Jesus was harsh and demanding, wasn't he? This isn't the kind and merciful Jesus we learned about in Sunday School, is it? Where is the gentle shepherd who proclaimed God's love for us?

And for the benefit of our visitors I should mention that the biblical readings we heard today were assigned by the church as part of an official schedule that leads us through the entire Bible in three years of Sundays and Holy Days. I did not pick this story for this day.

But even so, I believe the story contains an important message of grace and salvation that lives within the words Jesus spoke. So let's look at what happened in this reading from Mark's Gospel.

Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was, and Peter correctly said Jesus was the Messiah. In Matthew's version of this story he added that Jesus was the Son of God. And then

Jesus explained his fate and destiny on the cross. He knew what was going to happen to him, and he told the disciples that he would suffer and be killed and rise again in three days.

Well, this was not at all what Peter had in mind for Jesus. Peter's plan was not for Jesus to die, but rather for him to be a conquering Messiah who would drive the Romans out of Palestine and restore Israel to freedom and greatness. And in today's reading Peter took Jesus aside and began to give him a little grief for saying he would die.

But this caused Jesus to rebuke Peter. He looked at Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan!" And of course Jesus did not actually think Peter was Satan, but rather was making the point that interference with his ministry on earth was the devil's work.

And then look what happened next. Jesus said you must deny yourself, and pick up your cross and follow me. Try to save your life and you will lose it. If you seek worldly goods you will lose eternity. If you are ashamed of me now, I will be ashamed of you later. What was behind these ultimatums? How did Jesus intend them then, and how are we to understand them today?

### **III.**

Well, Jesus frequently used strong words and emotionally charged ideas to communicate with the crowds around him. And it's important to understand the context or setting in which he made some of these statements. This leads me to briefly digress with a story that illustrates the importance of context in trying to understand words with more than one possible meaning.

Most of you probably have heard William Shakespeare quoted for the proposition that "the first thing we do is kill all the lawyers." We see it on bumper stickers, tee shirts, and even coffee cups. And on the surface it seems critical of lawyers.

But let's look at the actual play. This slogan is from Part Two of King Henry VI, Act IV. A gang of ex-convicts and lowlifes was plotting to overthrow the king and seize power. And they were concerned about how they could do so without being stopped by the local population.

They were concerned that ordinary people would rise up to oppose their rebellion, and they wanted to prevent that from happening. So one of these scoundrels, Dick the Butcher, offered a solution and said, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

As a result, Shakespeare's real meaning was not critical of lawyers at all; it was just the opposite. He implicitly was praising them. Shakespeare actually held lawyers up as guardians of the rule of law, defenders of freedom, and supporters of the people. And he placed these well-known words that seemed critical of lawyers in the mouth of a scheming villain.

So we see that context is important. Words that are not understood in relation to the setting in which they were spoken can be misleading, not only in Shakespeare but also in the Bible.

And so here is the context of our story. Prior to the events described today, Jesus carried out a ministry of healing and teaching in and around Galilee, which was a relatively safe place for him. After today's events, he began his fateful journey to Jerusalem and the cross, and the danger increased. And as I said earlier, Jesus was aware of what was going to happen. He knew that he would be mocked, scourged, and crucified.

As a result, he wanted people to understand the risks and hardships of travelling with him. Those who opposed Jesus would start to pay more attention and plot ways to kill him. And people accompanying Jesus also would be in danger. Therefore he asked for total commitment, self-denial, and obedience because the stakes were high. Jesus wanted loyal disciples, not camp followers. He wanted those in the crowds to be dedicated believers, not just groupies.

And so Jesus spoke emphatically to be sure there was no ambiguity or confusion. We have done the same with our children. Sometimes our kids say we send out conflicting messages. We tell them we love them, and then we say things they think are harsh but that we know are for their own good. It was the same thing in today's reading.

#### **IV.**

This idea explains what Jesus meant when he said that we must pick up our cross and follow him. And this might be an uncomfortable image because we tend to think of a cross as a burden, or some tragedy or hardship. If someone tells us they have a cross to bear, we are likely to regard it in a negative sense and be thankful we do not have their problem.

But that is not what Jesus meant. He was not describing a cross that is forced upon us, but rather an intentional Christian discipline that we willingly accept as a way of life. In this sense the cross is not a burden but a blessing. Taking up our cross means getting our priorities straight.

And Jesus also said we must deny ourselves, and if we try to save our lives we will lose them. Again, he was using symbolic language in the context of the dangers he knew he would face.

But this does not mean we literally have to deny ourselves every comfort or pleasure in order to follow Jesus. Merely giving up things does not make a person Christian. Buddhist monks and other so-called back-to-nature religions do that.

What we do must be done in right way, and for the right reasons. We do not have to give up our possessions, or jobs, or our lifestyles. Rather, we simply cannot put those things above what Jesus wants us to do. This means the things we must deny are the things that interfere with our relationship with God, or get in the way of the Holy Spirit acting in our lives. Denying ourselves is not inconsistent with prosperity so long as we use our prosperity in righteous ways.

#### **V.**

But sometimes that is easier said than done. Our human nature, if left to its own devices, can lead us away from the blessings God wants for us. But fortunately we are not left to deal with it by ourselves. In fact, most of us cannot do it alone. That's why Jesus left the church behind for us. It's why we live in a community of faith and worship here at St. Thomas.

Through the church we can hear God's word, we can support and encourage friends and family in the faith, and we can carry our crosses in a joyful way. And there is a cost of doing this, but it is a real bargain. It simply involves shaping our values and priorities through prayer and worship, participating in the common life of our Christian community, and living into the truth of our Baptismal Covenant which we all will recite in a few minutes.

I often have said that I never knew anyone who, on their deathbed, believed they had spent too much time in church. It usually is just the opposite, and so I pray that we all will take advantage of the opportunities we have to gather here in worship.

The church can help us share a common life that unites us in God's love. Through the church we can know peace as we praise and thank God for our lives and for creation. And because we're here now we can see today's reading as a promise rather than a burden. We can be blessed and know God's peace even though peace is an elusive commodity in the world. *Amen.*