

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Street

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

Sunday, September 16, 2018

Proper 19 (B)

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

DRAFT

“The sting of reprisal molds a leader”

8 AM Sermon

by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel

according to Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them 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.”

Lord, forgive us as we forgive others.
Amen.

Pastor George MacLeod wrote,
“I...argue that the Cross be raised...at the

centre of the market-place as well as in the steeple of the church.... Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage-heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek; At the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he dies. And that is what he dies about.

“And that is where church [people] should be and what church [membership] should be about.”

[George MacLeod, “Only One Way Left”]

An early Christian theologian, Thomas a Kempis, wrote: “Jesus now has many lovers of his heavenly Kingdom, but few bearers of his cross.”

Eleanor Searle Whitney, a talented opera singer and philanthropist who sang briefly with the Billy Graham ministries, mused that “Christians are like tea bags. You never know what kind you are until you are in hot water.”

At our 10 AM service last month we had no acolytes, but the mother of one of

our youngest children offered her 5 year old son to fill in as an acolyte, a young boy who was always very enthusiastic about bringing up the offering with the ushers and passing the peace. He listened carefully to my verbal instructions before the service, and he did everything I asked. He stood with us at the Eucharist, but no one could see his head above the altar since he was too short to be seen. However, as he was holding the Gospel book during the reading of the Gospel lesson, his Mom saw he was holding the Gospel book

askew, and she came up quietly behind him and helped him readjust the book to be level. Now, realize, I am trying to read the Gospel from a height somewhere down near my knees. But indeed he kept holding the Gospel as expected, and I was able to read the Gospel as we always do at the 10 AM service. But as I reflected on what happened seamlessly at that reading was that his Mom did not take the book away from him to hold it at the ‘normal’ height, but she simply helped her young

son a tiny bit without dis-empowering him and his ministry that day.

Have you ever empowered someone who otherwise may have been embarrassed, or dismayed, or made to feel less than a full human? Let us make an example of both his mother and the young boy. --- God does things like that for us all the time, when we think back on various situations. God does not usually come down to chastise us for doing something that may not be quite 'perfect'. God understands us and our feelings, and God dearly loves us as a

mother loves and encourages her young son.

The late physicist Stephen Hawkins said he could not find a way to believe in God. Professor Hawkins perhaps was the most brilliant mind so far of the twenty-first Century, yet God was one person Stephen could not discover by mathematical equations or by observing the universe and the laws of the universe. But I saw an insightful presentation Stephen filmed to help explain why there are some 'holes' in some galaxies, and why the universe seems so chaotic at

times, and so on. He did a mind experiment where many ball bearings about two inches in diameter were rolled onto the wooden floor of the study room where some of his videos were produced with him sitting nearly motionless in his wheelchair but speaking with a computer generated voice he had chosen. The video showed the ball bearings roll onto this large empty floor, and because of the equal amounts of gravity between each ball, the balls seemed miraculously to arrange themselves very neatly into rows and columns across the entire floor. This

neat arrangement, Professor Hawkins said, was demonstrating how gravity tends to move everything in regular patterns. However, the observable universe is not so neatly arranged, and is quite disorganized, not at all what a physicist would have expected. And Stephen began to explain a higher reason for why there is such fundamental disorder in the universe. In his thought experiment he withdraws five ball bearings from that smooth floor, and what happens? The rest of the balls begin to roll hither and thither as they try

to equalize the gravity of the remaining balls. And as you may see in your mind's eye, the whole floor becomes chaotic. Professor Hawkins explained that what happens is an even more fundamental law of the universe than gravity, the law of imperfection. Nothing in our universe is ever perfect. Planets arrange themselves around their suns in some more or less orderly fashion, but as most school children know, the planets' courses around the sun are not exactly what one can predict from the laws of gravity, even

postulating a dark Ninth Planet. So Professor Hawkins said this more fundamental law of the universe, the law of imperfection means that nothing in the universe behaves perfectly, is arranged perfectly, or can be predicted perfectly.

For example, as you know there are many dark asteroids circulating around the sun, and in eleven years one the size of the Empire State Building will come closer to Earth than our manmade earth satellites, so we humans are always vulnerable to extinction. The last close encounter was with a smaller asteroid

which was invisible to any telescope until a few weeks before it made its way closer to earth than the moon's orbit.

This fundamental nature of our universe is as true of human beings as it is of suns and planets. None of us is perfect. None of us is completely whole. None of us are perfect. And that is demonstrated today in our Gospel lesson about the apostle Peter. Peter often tried his best, but his best was never perfect nor would ever be perfect. But the Lord Jesus accepted him just as he was, warts and all, impulsiveness, and daring, caring

yet unconcerned about the future of the faith, and Peter failed miserably when it came to spiritual truths. Peter's idea of the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ, was as someone like the Son of David; David as we know was a great general and eventual leader of all the tribes and peoples of Israel. But David expressed his leadership in killing people. David slaughtered thousands, including innocent people. David was bloodthirsty, despotic, adulterous, and downright mean. David would let nothing stand in his way. But

occasionally he sought God's face, and God corrected him and set David back on a preferred course. But David always strayed from God. And God had to keep calling David back.

Peter was similar to David. He was a jealous upstart, caring but uncaring, loving yet unloving, sinful to the core, very much like King David. But Christ saw in Peter possibility. Jesus saw in this hulk of a fisherman some potential, some promise, some hope. And Jesus took imperfect Peter under his wing, trying over and over again to instruct him,

coach him, coax him, teach him. But hard-headed Peter would not listen, and he would not learn. All those years Peter sat in the shadow of Jesus, and yet Peter still did not ‘get it’. Aren’t we a bit that way ourselves? We prefer power over persuasion, bending rules over obeying God’s rules, testing God’s mercy and love instead of basking in God’s ever-caring and forgiving arms.

Peter wanted a Davidic leader, a political guru, a sidekick instead of a mentor. Peter was as blinded by Satan as any other person, including Judas. And

Peter failed miserably over and over again. Yet Jesus always gave Peter the benefit of the doubt, and Jesus kept trying to mold Peter into a better person, and eventually into an amazing Apostle.

But Peter was a pain: Jesus hurled the biggest insult against any person possible by calling Peter “Satan”, the vilest and most evil of them all. Yet, Jesus always used words; Jesus never struck Peter physically; Jesus never had Peter arrested; Jesus never held Peter down until Peter cried for mercy. Jesus kept molding Peter, kept teaching Peter, kept

mentoring Peter. And even though Peter betrayed Jesus at the end by his denials that Peter even knew Jesus, Peter was, as are we, forgiven.

Jesus surely knew the universe and all in it are imperfect. And Jesus kept on trusting and loving all the humans he had made with his own hands at Creation.

The universe is and will always be imperfect until the universe eventually comes to an end because of its imperfection.

But Jesus wanted Peter to know that even the sinful and imperfect nature of

people would not stop his redemption of the humanity who believe in him. Jesus would go to the cross knowing full-well that we humans would always sin and be imperfect in everything we do or attempt to do. But that fact of our sinful nature never kept Jesus from loving us and trying to bring us back into the grace of his Father God, his heavenly parent.

And day by day, God keeps molding us and mending us and mentoring us until we are as perfect as we will ever be as Christ's disciples on earth, winning the lost, caring for the least, comforting the

downtrodden, loving every one of God's human creations good or bad.

Jesus always pulls us back from the clutches of sin and death, using us in miraculous ways if we will only cooperate with God, and through us God is bringing the perfect Kingdom of God slowly but surely into our sin-sick world.

Thanks be to God who never gives up on us just as Jesus never gave up on Peter.

Amen.

Description:

Imperfect Peter is called to task by Jesus much as are we when we stray. God loves us no matter what. But we are continuously being molded into better persons to be able to work miracles with God's help.

Tags:

Jesus, Christ, messiah, imperfect, Son, God, mentor, love, Satan, Hawkins, believe, miracles, gravity, law, Peter

St. John's Episcopal Church

61 Broad Street

Elizabeth, New Jersey 07201

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 19 (B)

September 13, 2009

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they

answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them 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."

Give us your insights, O Lord, so we may deliver them to others. Amen.

Last Sunday Jan and I attended an early Sunday church service at a Midwestern UCC Church before we went to the Episcopal Church in that town. In its Chapel where the 8 AM service is held, in the very front of the

chapel above the altar, is a huge four foot by five foot picture of the head of Christ. He is very slightly bronzed in countenance, but his face is clearly Caucasian white though, with nice blue or possibly brown eyes and a very neatly trimmed beard. The pastor looked quite the same, when I think about it, white skinned, blue eyes or maybe brown, with a neatly trimmed beard. He probably doesn't even realize his features have copied the picture on his Chapel wall that he was standing in front of. The message could easily be read to all there

that they are a Caucasian church, beards are OK if neatly trimmed, but if you don't look like this Jesus in some way you may find problems in being accepted here. There were no African Americans at that service. The next service was held in the large sanctuary that does not have a picture of Jesus hanging in it and I believe an occasional African American attends.

The pastor spoke of how they were having difficulties in regaining the attendance that they had a few years ago.

Not far from that church is a largely African American neighborhood. Go figure.

[And if you are reading this sermon and your church has a picture of Christ somewhere visible, you may want to see what message you may be sending to your congregation; some may not appreciate it.]

And to be sure, if one looks at all the pictures of Christ in our eleven foot high stained glass windows, you will quickly note that every one depicts a Caucasian Jesus. And we are probably not that

different from any other Episcopal or other denominational church in the US that at one time had or even now has a 'white' congregation. We have telegraphed our 'norm' too well, don't you think? I don't believe the Episcopal Church has caught on to one reason why its numbers are dwindling; the Caucasian population of the US is dwindling; our Rectors are mostly white, as are most Vestries and Bishops.

Fortunately here at St. John's we have some very forbearing African and African American attendees and

supporters. But the stained glass is perhaps a bit of stain on our message of “Christ is for all”. I seriously doubt most white church folk even realize what sort of story their church buildings’ pictures and stained glass windows are telling.

Last week we received offers for several of the windows here, and we are very likely to accept some of those offers sooner rather than later.

Up until the Newark riots in 1967, Elizabeth as a city was pretty much the white stronghold suburb of Newark. But those riots resulted in the burning of

huge numbers of African American neighborhoods less than four miles north from here, and the people rendered homeless had to migrate south into Elizabeth, among other towns around Newark, and the racial makeup of Elizabeth changed abruptly. By the time I came to Elizabeth in 1989, the African and African American population had risen to one third of the city's population, and has remained above twenty percent to this day. The large influx of Hispanic peoples has changed the character of the City even more dramatically since 1989,

as the Hispanic population is above sixty or seventy percent now, some quote eighty percent. So called 'white and others' now comprise only about five percent of the city's population, even though we still have a white mayor, a mostly white City Council, and a largely white police force. Change is resisted pretty handily on a political basis. None of our windows depict a familiar Hispanic religious scene. The closest we came was at the celebration of Divinio Ninio on July 12 when the folks from St.

Augustine's brought in their statues of the Divine Child.

Businesses around here, however, know where the dollars are, and almost all have Hispanic cashiers and managers, including the banks.

Here at St. John's we spent a bit over a hundred dollars a month advertising our church to new movers, people who had recently moved into Elizabeth. As it turned out, probably not unexpectedly in hindsight, the advertising was sent to a largely new Hispanic population, appropriately worded in Spanish, and we

did bring in a few Hispanic people, but as soon as the mailings stopped in June, the Hispanic attendance dropped to nearly zero. We don't really have enough conversational Spanish here to be able to sustain and hold the Hispanic visitors it seems. And we are pretty much representative of the rest of the Diocese of New Jersey.

So the message of who we say Jesus is in probably less than accepting to much of the majority population of Elizabeth.

It is not that difficult to see that someone may say our answer to ‘Who do we say Jesus is?’ would be a white, middle class, neatly trimmed male; note none of the stained glass windows depict Jesus as a very poor person, and in fact, we would likely feel something were strangely wrong if Jesus garments were less than pristine white. Yet we know he probably wore sandals and walked in a very dusty countryside and sat on dirty rocks and terrain. But I don’t think I have ever seen a picture of Jesus that depicts him wearing a dirty garment.

And we probably completely miss the meaning of the story where the woman washes off his feet and dries them with her hair, and the other scene where sweet smelling ointment was poured over his head. There was really no other deodorant in the first century.

Thus many of our misconceptions of Christ have formed our perception of him and our ministry to others in our neighborhoods.

On a more theological level, Nicky Gumbel in the Alpha course notes that his foundational teaching on “Who Is

Jesus?” is used in place of the more difficult topic of “Who Is God?” We really can only ‘see’ God by looking at Jesus. I saw a web site on the internet that has 29 different proofs that God exists and also 29 proofs that God does not exist. The existence of God, in philosophical terms, is tenuous at best. But we Christians know God by our knowledge of Christ, his teachings, his miracles, his life, and his death.

St. Peter is taken aback when Jesus alludes to Jesus’ impending crucifixion and indeed Peter pulls Jesus aside to

rebuke him for saying that he Jesus was going to be killed. Peter's view was that there can't be a killable, dying Messiah as the Messiah meant Jesus was the Anointed One of God and was surely omnipotent over death. But Peter misunderstood what Jesus' death would mean, life eternal for Peter and the rest of us who believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Jesus was not going to change the laws of human life just for himself, even though he could have done so for then his life would not really represent the human condition. And

even his inherent divinity was insufficient to raise him from death—his Heavenly Father raised him back to life. Jesus didn't defeat death by not dying; Jesus defeated death by dying and then showing that Death did not have control of him and his future. Jesus defeated Death and Satan.

I feel certain that everyone here today has more money than Jesus ever possessed, even considering the rate of exchange between denarii and dollars. We are all rich in his eyes. And typically we share very little of our wealth. Old

Testament tithing can't even make much of a strong pull on our wealth, and the New Testament edict of 'giving it all' is so far from our consciences and imagination, it really sounds ridiculous. But Jesus did say to the young man to sell what he owned and give it to the poor. And the one person he commended for giving was the widow who gave her all into the Temple offering box. Jesus did have a good word to say for Zacchaeus who promised to give half of his money to the poor, and that's the only "loophole" we have as far

as giving is concerned. The Pharisees tithed everything, but Jesus never commended the Pharisees. He wanted us to give far more.

The Episcopal Church has for decades affirmed tithing as its norm; I very seriously doubt Christ would congratulate us for that at all; we more likely stand condemned in his eyes for only tithing. And I shudder to think how we will be treated at the Judgment. We are all about like that woman in the stained glass window over there who kneels at Jesus feet looking somewhat

expectantly but maybe not so confidently as the angel behind her is searching for her name in the Book of Life but has not seemed to find it in the past hundred years. Isn't that a chilling thought and picture?

Stewardship is a troubling time for most people. We try to give off the top, from the first part of what we earn, but practically we give from what is left. God gets our leftovers.

I will commend to you that this year we give from the top, and to the top, that

we do not stop with a tithe but get well beyond that artificial barrier.

For decades humanity thought we could not survive breaking the sound barrier or the four minute mile until someone did. Then we take it as a given that the sound barrier is routine broken each day by our fighter jets and Olympic runners need to break the four minute mile just to have a place on their Olympic team.

I hope and pray that the Episcopal Church stops affirming the tithe at its next General Convention. It has become

an unbreakable barrier, and one only leading to smugness among the few rich folks who don't really need a tenth or half of their money in the first place.

Maybe this year you will break the tithing barrier. I pray so.

And breaking this tithing barrier will help us really see Jesus as he is, the giver, the healer, the lover of the world, our Savior.

Amen.