

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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Lord, let thy word only be spoken and thy word only be heard. Amen.

Sometimes we clergy don't always get our facts straight. I ran into that this week, here in the parish. Nothing earth shattering. And not the first time, nor the last. And it bugs me, because I try to be dutiful in research, and checking things out, and so forth. I have prided myself in the past on being right about something without putting others down. I confess that pride and need to control. But it sure is nice to have it all resolved. And Life is good.

But you know I have found a following truth that can be really difficult to handle, is when you get it right, and you're thinking well, all right, I'm doin' pretty good here... only to find that being right - only puts you into the position of having to walk some kind of walk that goes along with that talk you just talked!

Jesus did that to Peter, and all of a sudden Peter reacted – aggressively and wrongly against what Jesus knew exactly would be the result of being right. If I could just get it straight at the beginning, then perhaps I could handle everything else that comes along. If I could just stay focused through it all on Jesus... trust in him.

Last week I was blown away when I discovered the REST of the words and tune that go with "Turn your eyes upon Jesus." I had thought and I have taught it was written as a scripture chorus in the late 1950's. But it was written in 1918, 100 years ago this year. The verse texts and music were somewhat forgettable, though typical for its day. But the refrain turned out to be timeless. [SUNG: Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.]

The inspiration came from a pamphlet Helen Lemmel found, written by Lilius Trotter, a missionary. The pamphlet, entitled Focus, included these words,

What does this focusing [on Christ and His Glory] mean? Study the matter and you will see that it means two things - gathering in all that can be gathered, and letting the rest drop. The working of any lens - microscope, telescope, camera - will show you this. The lens of your own eye, in the room where you are sitting, as clearly as any other. Look at the window bars, and the beyond is only a shadow; look through at the distance, and it is the bars that turn into ghosts. You have to choose which you will fix your gaze upon and let the other go.

How do we bring things to a focus in the world of optics? Not by looking at the things to be dropped, but by looking at the one point that is to be brought out.

And then the words that burned in Helen, "Turn full your soul's vision to Jesus, and look and look at Him, and a strange dimness will come over all that is apart from Him, and the Divine "attraction" by which God's saints are made, even in this 20th century, will lay hold of you. For "He is worthy" to have all there is to be had in the heart that He has died to win."

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The irony, perhaps the power, was the song was written while Helen was virtually blind at 54, and her husband had left her many years before because of it.

When I was in 7th or 8th grade, learning to play the guitar, I also learned to play another song, "I have decided to follow Jesus." At first I thought it was an old time spiritual sung out from a cotton field somewhere. Wrong again. And that was before being ordained! In a missions hymnal I found that it was labeled, "From India." It was from an old missionary endeavor in India. Dr. P.P. Job and preacher in India relates the story of its origin in his book "Why God Why". The story begins in Wales from the great revival there 150 years ago, and hundreds of missionaries going out. Many went to North East India, at which time was known as Assam. Many of the tribes there were quite primitive and aggressive by nature. Some tribes were head-hunters. Into this hostile and aggressive community, came a group of Welsh missionaries spreading the message of love, peace and hope of Jesus Christ. Naturally, they were not welcomed. One Welsh missionary succeeded in converting a man, his wife, and two children. This man's faith proved contagious and many villagers began to accept Christianity. Angry, the village chief summoned all the villagers. He then called the family who had first converted to renounce their faith in public or face execution.

As the story goes, the man instantly began either to sing or proclaim out loud words that have become central parts of that song in English. **I have decided to follow Jesus. I will not turn back, I will not turn back.** Enraged at the refusal of the man, the chief – as happened with many missionaries and new converts in difficult places -- ordered his archers to shoot down the man's two children. As both boys lay dying on the floor, the chief asked, "Will you now not deny your faith? You have lost both your children. You will lose your wife too." But the man spoke or sang more words in reply: **Though None Go With Me, Still I Will Follow, There is No Turning Back, No Turning Back.** The chief was beside himself with fury and ordered the man's wife to be shot with an arrow. In a moment she joined her two children in death. Now he asked for the last time, "I will give you one more opportunity to deny your faith and live."

In the face of death the man proclaimed the final memorable lines:

The World is Behind Me, The Cross of Jesus is Before Me, I will not Turn Back, No Turning Back. He was shot dead like the rest of his family. But with their deaths, as the Welsh missionaries were to hear by word of mouth, a miracle took place. The chief who had ordered the killings was moved by the faith of the man. He wondered, "Why should this man, his wife and two children die for a Man who lived in a far-away land on another continent some 2,000 years ago? There must be some supernatural power behind the family, and I too want that supernatural power." In a spontaneous confession of faith, he declared, "I too belong to Jesus Christ!" When the crowd heard this from the mouth of their chief, the whole village accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior. This is the power of God in self-denying witness and demonstration.

It is a decision to follow -- to join oneself to God in Christ. And it is a decision to now live through and in that faith.

It is one thing to make that decision for oneself and take what may. But for Peter, when after the good feeling of knowing he had professed his faith correctly, and been rewarded in a new calling of ministry (little did he know what that would eventually mean) he is now listening to the One he just proclaimed as the focus of his life tell that he, Jesus, would now be going to

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Jerusalem to die. I'm sure that's all heard. His pride of look at me, is now shot through with an immense desire to keep this good times train still rolling. No! You will not do that. And Jesus makes his rebuke to the rebuke, Get behind me Satan. Because this is truly the core of Satan, to derail to detract Jesus from 1) dying on the cross, and 2) having disciples who will follow him there and beyond.

Then for part three of this quick action scenario, in the passage from the Gospel of Mark today, Jesus tells the disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." This decision exists in one life and crosses the threshold into another. But more specifically, it is our decision to move in a new direction. This is an act of will.

For Christians, the will is perfected when it mirrors the will of God. We WANT to pray as Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane with the words he used -- "thy will be done." We want our will be to in line with the will of God because we know that we are what we are through the will and grace of God. In the 13th century St. Francis of Assisi heard the words of Matthew's gospel (10.7-10) "As you go, proclaim the good news, Take no gold, no silver, nor brass in your belts for the journey." The words pierced his heart and he said about the incident: "This is what I have been wanting; this is what I have been seeking; this is what I long with all my heart to do." The will of God became as real to Francis as the feelings of his own flesh.

It becomes thus because Christianity is an experience based religion. God's will for us comes up against our own notions of self with their limited and sometime destructive visions. St. Augustine of Northern Africa, Hippo, wrote of his encounter with God through the Holy Scripture. He put it like this, "Somehow I flung myself down under a fig tree and gave way to the tears that were now streaming from my eyes.... I stemmed my tears and stood up..... I seized the book [St. Paul's Epistles] and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell, 'not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus, and make no provisions for the flesh and the lusts thereof.' (Romans 13: 13-14) He said, "I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled." It is the discovery of the grace and love of God -- succinctly described in the phrase, "the will of God."

One way or the other, there is a walk with God. Whether the self-determinant Peter, perhaps struggling with the effort of living righteously, finds the zenith of this striving by confessing Jesus, and then must follow in the unexpected self-sacrifice; or Augustine who lived too long in the pleasures of the world, the flesh and the devil, now breaking through into the life-giving presence of Jesus Christ and more than willingly taking on the rigors of discipleship, it is a willingness to continue. The New Testament describes this encounter with God as light, as a spiritual rebirth, a cleansing, becoming a new creation, or a transition from death to life -- to mention just a few, but God's will is discovered as loving, efficient, definite, resolute, and assured. And we are to take it on.

Thus St. Paul said to the Romans that he was an apostle "through God's will" -- it was not his own determination, but God's will which brought it about" Now back to the gospel for today, where Peter's confession can be seen in this same light of God's will.

When Jesus asked his disciples, "But who do you say I am?" Peter said, "You are the Christ the

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Messiah." It was not just a lucky guess, but a revelation -- a gift from God. It is the same kind of insight that God gives to all of us. This is our experience of the divine will. It is God's gift to us. But, like Peter, we often shape God's gift rather than receive it as given. When Peter heard the cost to be paid for the revelation of divine love he couldn't accept it. He heard JESUS giving a wrong answer. I don't blame him. It is incredible for any of us to take in the extent of God's gift of love and grace to us. We will always be sinners.

And here, our good News, God's eternal gift in believing is that we are not judged, but justified. We are welcomed home -- the price of pain has been paid. We do not have to earn the price, it has been paid.

So now the question remains for us to answer, "But you, who do you say that I am?" Our answer may be suddenly embracing, or gradually transforming, drawing us in degrees toward the realization that we have decided for ourselves this new life, with growing anticipation. We hear and probably know there will be sacrifice and the loss of many things we had previously cherished, but we also know that we are called to a larger hope, a greater vision of our lives. It is a journey with Christ in the way of the cross. We do not know exactly where it will lead us, but we know that we have a companion in the person of Christ. As the songs exhort us to decide, now, today, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus" as well as "Though none go with me, still I will follow. My decision is, still I will follow. No turning back."

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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