

Things of God vs. Things of Man

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In last week's Gospel reading, it was by grace through faith that Peter made a good confession when he said that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Good because Jesus Himself went on to say that He would build His church on that confession. But in this week's Gospel reading it doesn't take Peter very long to get it all wrong.

Today's Gospel is a continuation of Jesus' dialogue with His disciples that we heard last week. It begins by sharing with us that ***“from that time [on] Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed...and on the third day be raised.”***

Now maybe Peter didn't hear Jesus say that He would be raised on the third day. And maybe after the words came out of His mouth declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, all Peter was thinking about was how he got it right. Because after hearing Jesus speak about being killed by the elders, chief priests, and the scribes, Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him. Didn't Jesus understand that the long-awaited Messiah was supposed to be full of power and be that victorious king who would save His people and reign over them? Jesus just confirmed that He is the Son of the Living God! Suffer and die? That's not how it's supposed to be...

Like many of us, Peter didn't want to accept something that doesn't agree with his own hopes and dreams. The people of God had waited for a hero, anointed by God, to conquer their enemies and save them. This was their hope and what they had waited for all these years. And so, after hearing Jesus talk about His coming, suffering, and death, Peter pulls Jesus aside and says to Him, ***"Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."*** (v.22) ...And that's where Peter got it wrong... Jesus turns to Peter and says, ***"Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."***(v.23)

There are times when, like Peter, we too get it wrong. We've tended to think about the things of man as far back as the garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve believed the lie that they could become like God. And while we might be motivated to care for Jesus' ministry, like Peter, we all can tend to think that we know what's best for Jesus and His church. After all, don't you care and want it to be more relevant in our world today? And yet, in doing so, we can forget that this is His church, and we aren't God. As He says in Isaiah 55, ***"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*** (Isaiah 55:8-9)

The other day I came across a story of some well-intentioned church members who wanted to improve attendance at their church. So, they got together and hired a powerful advertising agency. The agency then went about dutifully doing their research, asking questions both to members, and non-members in the community so that

their recommendations could be implemented, and church attendance might increase. What was their recommendation? To get rid of all the crosses in the church...because, as they reasoned, a cross can send a negative message to prospective attendees who want to feel good about coming to church and not think about negative things like death....that probably wasn't the best recommendation from that agency!

Why? Because we don't want to get rid of the cross. While, at the time of Jesus, the cross meant death by the most painful and humiliating way possible, Jesus knew that He had to take up the cross for all the times that we've tried to be like God, for all the times that we thought we knew better, even with the best of intentions, for all the times we're stubborn in our ways, and self-righteous in our own thoughts of how things should be done. Still, Jesus shows us a different way. The way of the cross - through His life, death, and resurrection.

Jesus says to His disciples, ***“if anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”*** (v.24-25) If His disciples hadn't done this, if they thought that they knew better, and not denied themselves, or just became “lukewarm” followers, we would never have come to see the cross as a powerful reminder of God's sacrificial and redemptive love for us.

You see, taking up your cross is much more than putting something around your neck. And self-denial doesn't simply mean that you might deny yourself something like dessert, ice cream, or having fun. Rather, to get it right is

to deny your own authority over your life and surrendering to Jesus and allowing His Word to be your guide in this life, this is the way of the cross.

And yet, Jesus goes on to say, ***“What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?... The Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay each person according to what He has done.”***

Like Peter so long ago, it doesn't take us very long to get it wrong. And so, not only do we acknowledge Him as our Living Lord and Savior, but as individuals, and as His church, we look to the cross and return to it time and time again so that we might share a servant's heart with others. So that in and through us, the mission of His church might be fulfilled, and others might come to know the way of Our Savior. The way that leads us through self-denial and death, to eternal life in His Kingdom, as we all look forward to that day when He will come again.

In Jesus' name. Amen.