

Homily
The Rev. Melody N. Rockwell
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 17
St. Mark's & Anamosa State Prison, Anamosa, Iowa
August 28, 2011

Lectionary:
Jeremiah 15:15-21
Psalms 26:1-8
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

Did you hear what Jesus said to Peter in the Gospel reading today? "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me..."

Peter must have been gut-wrenched by this harsh rebuke from the one he trusted and relied upon completely, the one he had so recently proclaimed, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." At *that* moment of Peter's proclamation, Jesus had said to Peter, "Blessed are you... I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven..." Jesus had singled out his disciple Peter as the *rock* upon whom his church would be built. And now, here was Jesus saying, "You are a *stumbling block* to me..."

If we were in Peter's place, wouldn't we be hurt and confused? After all, what had Peter said that was so wrong? Jesus had just revealed to his disciples that he would soon undergo great suffering and be killed. Peter understandably responded with a great surge of protective love, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!"

If we were in Peter's place, wouldn't we want to hold onto the healing love and deep friendship experienced in the presence of Jesus? To lose his beloved rabbi must have been a terrifying prospect for Peter. Yet, Jesus rejected Peter's plea saying, "Get behind me, Satan!"

If we were in Peter's place, wouldn't we find it impossible to believe that Jesus' suffering and death was needed to inaugurate the kingdom of God? Wouldn't we ask if there was an easier way, a less painful process of arriving at the same result? Couldn't Jesus just tone down his rhetoric, be less provoking, keep a low profile and *live* to continue his important ministry on earth?

But, Jesus would not accommodate his mission in God to human expectations. Instead, he said to Peter, "Follow me." In *The Message Bible*, Jesus says to Peter: "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am... Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want, but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for? "

In the Old Testament lesson today, the prophet Jeremiah pleads for God to bring down retribution on his persecutors. Jeremiah has eaten and proclaimed God's word. Yet, while totally committed to God's service, he has been reviled, beaten

and ostracized. Where has it gotten him? No one listens to him. What's the point? Couldn't he just tone down his rhetoric, be less indignant and let the good times roll? Or, couldn't God just 'smoke' Jeremiah's enemies?

God's response to Jeremiah, as Jesus' response was to Peter, does not resort to violence or retribution as a means of improving the situation. Jeremiah is called to rededicate himself by trusting in God's purpose. He must bear up... not cave in. God promises to vindicate Jeremiah by strengthening him, *not* by annihilating others. God says to Jeremiah: "Stand before me. Utter what is precious and not what is worthless, and you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze."









I believe God's call to Jeremiah is a call to each of us – as individuals and as a church, a people of God – to turn back to God, to speak for God and become strengthened in God's love. I believe that Jesus' call to Peter is a call to us to become Christ-centered, to give of ourselves even when we feel persecuted.

We can answer this call to become authentic followers of Christ, but are we willing to face insults or exclusion by openly living our faith and truly respecting the dignity of those around us? Or, do we play Christian charades; going through empty religious motions while making sure that we are recognized as top dog, in charge, the ones served first and most? Or perhaps for us, as theologian Stephen Cook notes, "The problem is the absurdity of nonchalant living..."

How do we keep on course for Christ? Paul gives us excellent advice in his letter to the Romans; a covenant of how we are challenged to live together in Christ. As we read Romans 12, verses 9 through 21 together, I invite you to think about how *you* personally apply these instructions in your life:

Romans 12:9-21 ~

A MORNING COVENANT

-  *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.*
-  *Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.*
-  *Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.*
-  *Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*
-  *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.*
-  *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*
-  *Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.*
-  *Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.*

- ✚ *If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*
- ✚ *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*
- ✚ *No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."*
- ✚ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. ALLELUIA! AMEN!*

The Message Bible introduces this passage of scripture, this covenant, by translating Paul's words in this way: "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out."

In this scripture from Romans, we are challenged to offer ourselves humbly, generously and graciously; *absolutely* including blessing and feeding our enemies. We can *all* think of ways we can 'hold fast to good' and not be lured into addictive or harmful behaviors. We can *all* put our energies fully into serving and celebrating the best in others, while praying for hope, patience and perseverance to do so. We can *all* strive to live more peaceably in each moment of every day.

But, what about this business of our never repaying anyone evil for evil and never avenging ourselves? Do you remember the killings in 2006 of the Amish school girls in Pennsylvania? Do you remember how the Amish community reacted to the killer and his family? Like many of us, a fellow inmate of yours, Richard Winemiller, was anguished by the senseless tragedy and astonished by the Amish response. Wrestling to understand this event, he wrote:

Last night, I lay here in my cell recalling the facts and the short, sound bite interviews several members of that community gave to the hungry media. One woman, a mid-wife, told of the delivery into the world of one of those little girls, how the family would take their child home, make her a new dress and prepare her for burial, and forgiveness. An older gentleman spoke of God's will, that the man who committed those terrible acts was not evil, and again, forgiveness. Another gentleman, grandfather to one of the girls killed, told of God's will and the forgiveness he felt in his heart. Another woman spoke of living what Jesus Christ taught, forgiveness. Richard observed: I thought for some time of these people, their words and lifestyle... I thought of all they had lost as a result of the depravity that had visited them... that they did not comprehend the 'evil' and how 'our world' came crashing into theirs with a raging vengeance. Richard began to understand

the enormity of what was evident in the Amish response: *There was no anger, not even a hint of animosity. There was no fear. No revenge. Only love for the world and forgiveness, true and complete. No wonder they seemed so foreign, so other worldly!* He concluded: *And, this tragedy is not all what I first believed: that 'our world' with all its ugliness had burst into the Amish community with a raging vengeance, but it is truly the beauty of Christ, through their world, which has crashed into ours.*

Amen. This event of our time is a beautiful illumination of Jesus Christ, our icon of forgiveness, of not seeking revenge. When Jesus was suffering death upon the cross, he did not accuse or call for vengeance. He prayed to God, "Father, forgive them."

Imagine what would happen to our lives, what shape they would take if we incorporated forgiveness, instead of revenge into our actions and reactions. Imagine the vitality of love that could occur if we prayed this scripture as a covenant with Christ each morning... if we determined how with God's help, we would bring the covenant alive in our daily actions. Like Peter, we would learn never to rest on praise of the past, but to be constantly renewed. Like Jeremiah, we would be strengthened by bringing God's word into our very being. This is an invitation to renewed purpose in discipleship to Jesus Christ each day.

May each of us answer this call, "Yes, Lord, here I am." Alleluia. Amen.