

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost
September 3, 2017
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

If you were ever thinking of opening a Christian bookstore or coffee shop and wanted plaques either to put on the walls for decorative or for sale, you could do far worse than picking a line or two from this morning's second reading. It's just chock full of pithy exhortations, any one of which could be etched into a plaque and posted somewhere for our edification:

*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.*

The words are ennobling, aspirational. They call on us to live lives worthy of the one who calls us ... and some of them seem especially apt in these days after Hurricane Harvey:

*Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*

But just possibly it all seems more than a little daunting, intimidating, even impossible:

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
Do not repay anyone evil for evil ...
... so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

You might be tempted to wonder, "Just who does Paul think we are, SAINTS?!"

The answer, in point of fact, is, "Yes, that's exactly what he thinks we are." Saints, after all, was one of his preferred terms for Christians. (Though, at times, I think that even Paul uses the term ironically.)

Perhaps you recall the old children's song adults love to sing just about every year for All Saints' Day: "I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true ..."



The song reminds us of that all sorts of people qualify as saints of God. The song tells us we might meet one of the saints of God just about anywhere: "in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea."

And, in the end, we who sing it all agree that "the saints of God are just folk like me."

But do we believe the words? It might be good to ask if the saints of God ever found it easy.

Take Simon, for example. Simon Peter. *Saint Peter*, we call him. By universal tradition, he was the first head of the Church in Rome, the first Pope. Last Sunday, we heard how pleased Jesus was with him being able to confess Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus was so pleased he gave Simon a new name that day, the Rock! Jesus promised him the “keys of the kingdom.” Even if the full meaning of that new name and the “keys of the kingdom” is open to different interpretations, it’s clearly all good!

But, for all that, we know that Saint Peter hardly ever lived up to his saintly honorific. Last Sunday, Jesus called Peter a rock, but this Sunday, he calls him a stumbling block. And it didn’t take Jesus a full week to change his mind about Peter either; as Matthew tells it, this is all part of the same get-together. (Oh, and Jesus calls him “Satan,” as well – which is pretty harsh.)

And that’s pretty much Peter all through the gospels. A few weeks back, we recalled the story of the time when Peter stepped out of the boat and walked on water with Jesus. But it was only for a moment ... and then he sank. Like a rock! On the night of Jesus’ betrayal, the eve before his crucifixion, Peter says that he loves Jesus; he insists that he will never deny Jesus; he professes his willingness even to die with Jesus. But then he denies Jesus that same night. Three times!

Or think about Moses. In this morning’s first reading, we hear the story of his call, God speaking to him out of an unquenchable burning bush. Moses is remembered, three-and-a-half thousand years later, not just for that brief encounter; he’s remembered for leading God’s people out of slavery in Egypt to their freedom in the Promised Land, for parting the Red Sea so that the people could walk through on dry land, and for going up the mountain to talk to God, face to face, and coming back down, his skin aglow, with the Ten Commandments.

But that larger-than-life hero is far from the simple shepherd we see this morning.

Before we pick up this morning’s story, though, let’s consider out how we got here. Last Sunday, we heard of how Moses was saved by several subversive and impressive women. As a result, he was born into a Hebrew family, but raised in Pharaoh’s household to be a prince. But it didn’t last. Perhaps you remember what happened. Moses saw an Egyptian beating one of his Hebrew kinfolk one day, so he killed the Egyptian, and, in short order, Moses became a fugitive; the Hebrew people didn’t trust him and Pharaoh wanted him dead, so Moses fled. He ended up in a place called Midian, which was attractive to him mostly because nobody knew who he was there. There, he married a Midianite woman. Together, they started a family. And Moses spent his days tending the sheep of his father-in-law. That’s how he got there that day.

By just about any measure, Moses has had quite a come-down from being an Egyptian prince. But he seems resigned, if not entirely happy, to live out his days as an assisting shepherd in the middle of nowhere. That is, until God calls to him out of that burning bush to be so much more:

“I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

That’s what God tells Moses.

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Now I suppose the words might sound like a show of modesty, a sign of humility. But it seems to me his response is more likely a cover for the entirely understandable fear that would have filled him entirely. He asks if he's really the right person for the job, but the thing is ... Moses is actually pretty much the perfect person for the job. Killing that Egyptian was ill-considered, at best, but the deed was born of his deep sense that it was wrong to victimize and mistreat these people. And having been brought up in the house of one Pharaoh, Moses is just about the only person who could confront this Pharaoh for the sake of the Hebrew people.

It's kind of hard to argue with a burning bush, but Moses tries. I think he argues with God because he was pretty happy with the life he had made for himself, laying low out there in the middle of nowhere. It wasn't much of a life, as some would have seen it, but it was his life.

In this morning's gospel, Jesus warns against trying to save our lives, lest we lose them, and of losing our lives in order to save them. I get how the words can sound twisted and confusing. But I think we see something of an illustration of what Jesus was getting at when we look at Moses standing before that burning bush. He had settled for a smaller life than the one God intended for him. But God calls, expecting a response. And if Moses accepts that calling, he'll have to let go of his old life, no matter how satisfied he was with it.

In that sense, he's not so different from Peter, a simple fisherman before Jesus first called him. But he responds to that, losing his old life in order to grab hold of a new one. And that's what he does all along the way: he responds and then he trips up and falls, then he gets back up again to grab hold of that new life to which he's been called, only to trip up again ... and again. We catch him at an especially low moment in this morning's gospel, but he does learn to let go of his old life in order to embrace the new one offered him.

I suspect it never ceased to be frightening. Not for Peter and not for Moses. And even in those moments, later in life, when they accomplished more than they would once have asked or imagined, I daresay something of the old underachiever remained.

It's more like the song than we typically imagine: "the saints of God are just folk like [you and] me." It's a thought we do well to hang onto, lest we declare ourselves ill-equipped to respond to whatever God is calling us to do and to become. If the saints of God – folk like Moses and Paul and Peter – are folk like you and me, there might be something more expected of us than we find entirely comfortable.

And so I return to those pithy exhortations of Paul and invite you to hear them as a true calling. More than nice words for decoration, they are ennobling and encouraging – even if at times daunting and intimidating. And they are given to us, that we, the saints of God in our time and place might do more than appreciate the good thought and ideas; they are given to us to live:

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