

Episcopal Church of St. Andrew

4 Arthur Kill Road

Staten Island, New York 10306

The Forteenth Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 17 (A)

September 3, 2023

A Sermon by the Rev. Joseph Parrish

DRAFT

“What We Do with What We Have?”

The Gospel: Matthew 16:21-27

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be

killed, and on the third day be raised.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "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 will find it.

For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done."

Lord, we faint from following you because we know the way leads to the cross. Help us to have courage and to do what we are called to do as your followers. Amen.

The art of denial is often a fine honed tool. I read the progressive letters of a person in Texas who was experiencing the coming of the big hurricane there. He at first was quite calm and rationale in his early email letters. He carefully put his truck into the overfilled garage, dusted off the generator, fed the dog and cat, bought a few extra groceries, and kept plucking away on his computer email system. Then as the rains began to pick up he became a bit more apprehensive. A city only a few miles away was reporting winds approaching

fifty miles an hour. But still he posted notes to his email system. Then there was the sound of a great rain, some said a town not so far away got over thirty inches of rain, and it began coming down in buckets where he was living. He began thinking of his wife and daughter some miles away and out of the hurricane's path. But still he was not particularly worried. He had enough food to stick it out for several days. But then there was total darkness. The electricity was off. He was too warm to sleep--no air conditioning, no fan. So his

rest was sporadic. For many hours and into the next day there was no television, no computer, no telephone, although actually he found a phone that had not been affected by the outage and was able to get news about the storm. It was a tornado that had cut his power just outside of town. Tornadoes are spawned by hurricanes, and the twisters can be even more destructive, just not as broad in width. Finally after hours in the dark, he got some power back on. And in his relief he realized how much he was dependent on all the niceties of life, the

coffee maker, refrigerator, freezer, television, telephone, and just being to get out of the house without stumbling into a roadblock. The reality he had originally been able to convince himself was no big deal turned out to be a big deal.

How often do we downplay something significant in our lives? We even sometimes conspire to keep news from a loved one who is dying. Someone wrote of a report their mother had gotten when she went in for cancer surgery. The surgeons quickly

determined the mass was an inoperable terminal pancreatic cancer, and ended the surgery quickly. No one in the woman's family was willing to break the news to her. And they kept acting as if the surgery was a fantastic success. Yet the woman would be dying in a short while. The family kept her from knowing the truth.

Peter wanted to protect Jesus from the big bad wolf Herod. No way was Peter going to have Jesus tell them that he Jesus was on the pathway to death. Peter wanted nothing to do with a leader that

was so negative and resolute about his end. Peter wanted a hero, a real live action hero, but Jesus was not filling that mold. So Peter physically pulled Jesus aside and scolded him about his poor attitude. But Jesus reacted strongly, called Peter "Satan" and a "stumbling block." Peter who had just been promised the keys to the kingdom was called a blockhead of the greatest proportions.

Jesus saw the fear his own end was causing in his disciples. They would not be secure in their day to day lives any

longer if their leader were done in by the powers that be. Why, if Jesus was vulnerable, were not they, the disciples even more so? Were not their own lives at risk here in this venture that was sounding more and more foolish as Jesus begins to spout doubts about his uncertain future, indeed, speaking about his sure demise?

A pastor told me the story of a prominent man in his congregation who had been diagnosed with a fatal cancer. All his friends lined up to go to see him in the hospital, but none could bring

themselves to enter the room. They just stood outside the closed door and chatted and were greatly relieved when the pastor appeared. Their gifts they showered on the pastor, asking, even pleading, for him to take them inside the room to their friend. Death was such a foreboding thing that they did not want even to be in the presence of their dying friend. It was as if they thought his fatal disease were contagious. But it was the thought of death that had them in the terror of its grips. They felt too young to die. But to have a comrade of similar

age who was not able to affirm their convictions of youthful immortality was simply not in their own "equation" of life. Life would go on and on for them, or so they tried to reason.

Doomsday sayers are dismissed out of hand in modern society. <>

Someone has said they really cannot follow a faith that puts the cross so high and prominently. Why would a God, a loving God, require God's Son to die for someone else's sins? I heard an Episcopal bishop voice just exactly that. He did not want to hear about a sadistic

God who would place a loved one in jeopardy of life. But maybe God had a longer view than do we. If God's Son did not die, billions, even trillions of others would have to die, and die an eternal and damning and final death. The only thing between those sinners, us, and a finality that held no hope was the one person who could take such a burden on his back. We are numbered among those sinners who had no other hope than Christ's cross. If Peter had been successful in convincing Jesus that there just had to be a better way, a less

offensive way, an easier way, if Peter had succeeded, Satan would have won. So indeed at that very moment Satan had put on the gloves and was harbored inside of the loquacious Peter, ready for the final knockout of God's grand plan of salvation.

Have you ever been tempted to go a little bit closer to safety in your Christian witness than was really necessary?

When a crude joke is expressed, aren't we tempted to just ignore it? Or maybe it is a racial slur, or a snide put-down of a person wracked by lifelong poverty

"They're just lazy." Has that never occurred to us?

While I was in Denver at a church convention, a rather gaunt and youngish man approached me on the street one day and asked for change. He looked me in the eye and said, "I'm not on drugs. I'm not a drug addict." And I believed him. But my instinct was to think, "He probably is on drugs and is trying to lower my resistance to him." Yet, could indeed he simply be one of those mired in poverty. The numbers of children living in poverty since the so-called

Welfare Reforms went into effect has increased each year. Whereas up until 1995 the numbers of children impoverished and hungry had been decreasing. Women with dependent children who make up ninety percent of those receiving welfare in the United States, these women and their families have less a year to live on since the heartless welfare reforms were put into place. Politicians deftly hide behind the promise of "work for all," when indeed there simply is no work for all. They use our desires for lower taxes to indict us

for not caring about the plight of the dozens around us who have had nothing to eat this day or yesterday or the day before that. Or the ones who slept in abandoned cars and abandoned houses and in doorways and under the expressways--those are the invisible poor whom we try to overlook each day. We too have been coopted by the desire for more in our pocket and less in the mouths of others.

What American can look a starving child in the Sudan in the eye, or a refugee in a detention center, or a mother

who has nothing for her baby tonight?

We all are so guilty that we could not stand the scrutiny of a loving God.

There is absolutely no way we can earn or deserve our salvation wrought by a sinless man who died on a cross that we might be free of an eternal curse.

Arch Taylor, a former missionary to Japan and pastor of a church in Louisville, Kentucky, compiled an unsettling set of statistics about the United States [Sermonshop Discussion Note 7447]. For most of the past century the number of people in prisons was

about 110 per 100,000 population--110 per 100,000 population. Today it is well over 645 per 100,000, nearly six times the historic average for the rest of this century. Prison building and prison maintenance is one of the fastest growth industries in the nation today. And there is a huge disproportionality of ethnic and racial representation in those prisons. The system has victimized the poor and oppressed. And it is feeding on itself. Prisons become educational facilities for crime. If you did not know how to commit an armed robbery before you

were in prison, you sure do once you have been there for six months. But for some reason, the rate of literacy does not even budge for those who are incarcerated. Just as many cannot read when they come out of prison as when they went in. And they are no better able to support themselves than when they committed their first crime, which now is most often drug related, about ninety percent, the receptionist at a nearby County Prison told me.

What can be reasons for this huge increase in prisoners in our society? The

US spends only \$35 billion dollars a year on education in the federal budget, but we spend \$281 billion on military operations and the development of military hardware, almost eight times as much to kill people as to educate people. Our defense budget for the United States is over twenty percent higher than the total defense budgets of the next highest nine nations of the world's defense budgets, including Russia, China, England, Japan, France, Germany, and North Korea.

We are beginning the stewardship season this month. Maybe we need to donate some of our time to the Habitat for Humanity project to build some affordable housing. Maybe we need to find some lonely person in a nursing home and visit them regularly. Maybe we have an elderly neighbor or a disabled person living near our home who needs some extra attention. Maybe we need to stand up for the needs of the neglected. Any of these things could be our cross. Crosses are not beautiful things. They oftentimes are not things

we get much recognition for. But God in heaven sees what ever we do and rewards us for it. Maybe we need to write our congressperson to lobby for justice for workers, for stressed out cities, for the immigrant, for the homeless. Whatever our hand finds to do, let us do it diligently for that is God's call to us. That is our cross.

Let us not be stumbling blocks for the in-breaking kingdom of God. Rather let us be the solutions for some of the problems rather than being just a part of

the problem. And recruit our friends and neighbors to help us in this effort. There is more than enough work to go around.

Finally after receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter woke up, and Peter became the rock he was supposed to be from the beginning. May God enliven each of us as God enlivened Peter. Let us hear the call to take up Christ's cross in our world today. If it is not we, then there will be no one who will do it.

We are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture. Come let us adore God and vigorously work in Christ's

vineyard. There is much to be done to prepare the kingdom of God's reign on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

Description: Today is the first day of our lives to become better stewards of our time, our talents, and our treasure. Let us become shining examples for others seeking God's Holy Spirit in their lives.

Tags: Denial, comfort, stewardship, time, talent, treasure, ministry, weak, orphan, widows, needy, hungry