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Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

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The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Today's sermon is taken from Matthew, chapter 16, verses 21-28.

O God, we come together because we need you, we need one another, and we need to hear your word; and if we hear it here, let us become so possessed by it that we become servants of it out in your world. Amen

I had a wonderful vacation. One particular day I was having a good time, and I was walking around in Provincetown. For those of you who have been there recently or maybe many years ago, you know it's a very busy place. Pedestrians seem to have the right-of-way there and for vehicles it's very hard to get around. This one particular car came up, and the person in the car leaned out the window and asked me for directions. I believe the person was originally from India, and he asked me for directions to the Visitors' Center. I don't know if at the time I had a mind block or what, but I thought what he meant by the Visitors' Center was the Chamber of Commerce building that was located in downtown Provincetown just before you get out to the parking lot of the harbor. So I gave very good directions to there, which meant he was going to have to go through a lot of pedestrian traffic and vehicular traffic, but before he could get there, find a parking place, etc. As he thanked me profusely and then headed off, I realized that probably what he really wanted was for me to tell him to just turn his car around and go straight on the road back to the National Park Visitors' Center which would have allowed him to go for a very nice drive along the beach and back to the Visitors' Center. He would have avoided all that traffic and all the people and would have found a place to park and would have gotten all the information; but I really messed up.

Have you ever had a setback, a defeat, a screw up? Have you ever snatched failure from the jaws of success? Playwright Oscar Wilde once commented after a disastrous opening night that his play was a great success but the audience was a failure. (laughter) That's one way of handling defeat, I guess. I could have thought, "Well, the man was from India, and he really didn't know all that much about anything."

Winston Churchill had that same ability to spin a setback into something else. He was once asked, "What most prepared you to lead England through World War II?" His reply was, "It was the time I repeated a class in grade school." His questioner then asked, "You mean you flunked a grade?" Winston Churchill straightened himself up to his full height and replied, "I never flunked in my life. I was given a second opportunity to get it right."
(laughter) That's the way to handle defeat -- look at it as a second chance to get it right.

Simon Peter knew about second chances. You will remember from a couple of weeks ago that Jesus and his disciples were in the region of Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked them, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” And they replied, “Some say John the Baptist and others say Elijah, and still others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you.” Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am?” It was Simon Peter who answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and Jesus heaped on Simon Peter words of profound praise for his answer. “Blessed are you, Simon, Son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

Now, today’s gospel reading follows that rapturous scene. Matthew tells us that from that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders and the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. At this, says Matthew, Simon Peter took Jesus aside and he began to rebuke him. Can you imagine anyone rebuking the Messiah, the Son of the Living God? Simon Peter has proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah; now he is rebuking him! “Never, Lord,” he said, “This shall never happen to you!” Well, you know what happens next. Jesus turns and says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the concerns of God but of merely human concerns.”

What a turn around! It takes Simon Peter only seven verses to go from being the rock upon from which Jesus will build his church to being the voice of Satan tempting Jesus to avoid the cross! That is one of the reasons I love the Bible. There is no effort to sanitize these stories; there is no attempt to make Biblical characters more holy than they were. One moment Peter proclaims Jesus as the Messiah, and the next moment he is telling Jesus how to go about his work! One moment he is in the garden defending Jesus with a sword against a Roman legion, and the next he standing outside the palace where Jesus is being tried and denies with an oath that he ever knew Jesus. One moment he is hiding as Jesus is being crucified, and the next he is proudly proclaiming Jesus’ message to thousands of listeners on the Day of Pentecost. This is Simon Peter.

Even more important, however, is this truth: You and I are Simon Peter -- up and down, in and out, defending and denying -- that’s us. We can identify with this fickle disciple. When he looked back on it later, Simon Peter probably regretted trying to correct Jesus. We all say dumb things from time to time; we all take our feet and shove them toe-first into our mouths. Maybe I’m just speaking for myself, but I suspect it is part of the human condition. I wish I could have been more precise for that man.

A few years ago I read the memoirs of Barbara Bush. In that she described one of her most embarrassing moments. Along with her husband, then the Vice President, Mrs. Bush was lunching with Emperor Hirohito at Tokyo’s Imperial Palace. She was sitting next to the

Emperor and Mrs. Bush found conversation an uphill task. To all her efforts at verbal engagement the Emperor would simply smile and answer “yes” or “no” with an occasional “thank you” tossed in. Looking around at her elegant surroundings, Mrs. Bush complimented Hirohito on his official residence. “Thank you,” he said. “Is it new?” pressed Mrs. Bush. “Yes,” Hirohito replied. “Was the old palace just so old that it was falling down?” asked Mrs. Bush. In his most charming and regal manner Hirohito replied, “No, I’m afraid that you bombed it.” (hearty laughter) Oops! Mrs. Bush didn’t regard that at one of her finest hours, but we’ve all done it. At the least appropriate moment we blurted out something dumb.

Simon Peter rebuked Jesus. The truth is that Peter cared about his friend Jesus. Peter didn’t want him to suffer and die, but something else vexed Peter. How could the Messiah be put to death. That didn’t make sense. Peter was impetuous and a little impertinent in his rebuke of Jesus, but he was being quite honest. “Never, Lord,” he said. “This shall never happen to you.” And as usual, Peter was probably saying what the other disciples were thinking. “If we were honest about it, there is a lot about our faith that bothers all of us.” If that is not so, why are we not turning this community upside down with our zeal for the gospel. Why are we so anemic with our witness for Jesus?

Soren Kierkegaard once told a parable about a town where all the citizens loved and admired the fire chief and his crew. One day the alarm went off at the fire house and so the chief and his crew hurried to get into their wagon to race toward the burning building. But part of the way there the road was blocked and hundreds of citizens were standing in the street holding squirt guns. Occasionally the people would turn into the direction of the fire and shoot off their tiny guns. The fire chief yelled at them: “What are you doing? Why do you have water pistols? What are you trying to accomplish?” The citizens replied, “We’re all gathered here to support your efforts. We all believe in the good work you do in this community, and each of us has come to make a humble contribution.” The people in the crowd that once again smiled at each other and looked in the direction of the raging inferno and squirted some water from their pistols. In disbelief the fire chief looked at them and said, “Get out of here! Fires like this are not for well-meaning people who want to make limited contributions. Some situations demand firemen; for many to risk their lives in putting out the flames.”

Rather than fire hoses, we so often stand around squirting our water pistols, don’t we? Why? Because we are like Simon Peter, because before he was confronted by the risen Jesus. Sometimes we’re up, sometimes we’re down. Sometimes we are convinced, other times we are confused. Sometimes we are soldiers in Jesus’ army, and other times we are missing in action. Thank God for grace. Surely none of us merit salvation.

After Jesus confronts Peter about his impetuous comments, Jesus spells out what is facing those who give their lives to him completely. Jesus says to his disciples: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Or whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” This is heavy

stuff. Jesus says if we want to follow him, we must take up his cross.

In August 2003 the Church of the Holy Cross in New York City was broken into twice. In the first event thieves made away with a metal money box. Three weeks later vandals escaped with something much more puzzling. Being a Catholic church, there was a large crucifix in the church. The thieves had unbolted the four-foot-long, two-hundred-pound plaster of Jesus from the crucifix but left behind the wooden cross to which it was attached. The church caretaker, David St. James, confessed his bewilderment at this. "They just decided they were going to leave the cross and take Jesus," he said. "We don't know why they just took him. We figure if you want the crucifix, you take the whole crucifix." We know why, don't we? Many people would like to have Jesus and leave his cross behind. Jesus represents forgiveness and grace. Jesus is a divine friend who accepts us as we are, and hears our prayers, and helps us in times of need. Who wouldn't want Jesus? But his cross, on the other hand, represents discipline and self denial. The cross represents service and sacrifice. The cross represents taking our eyes off of ourselves and putting them on those who Jesus died for. That's an entirely different matter altogether. We want Jesus; we're uncertain about taking up his cross. Yes, those thieves are not the only ones who want to take Jesus but not his cross. That is our temptation as well.

Peter backslid in a hurry when he was confronted with a message of the cross, and often we will too; but fortunately that's not the end of the story. Peter had an encounter with the risen Jesus, and a man who had been a fickle reed became a solid rock of faith and service, and that can also happen to you and me.

In the beginning of August my son-in-law Rob White rode his bicycle in the Pan-Mass challenge. I think some of you contributed to his bike ride. That particular event raises about thirty-four million dollars for cancer research and help. Rob rode from Sturbridge to Bourne and then from Bourne to Provincetown -- one hundred and ninety-three miles. He raised, himself, over five thousand dollars. It made me cry. What a thing for someone else.

Lillian Randall and Riley Bruce and Sarah Balkam left the comfort of the Cape and went for a week on a missionary trip to El Salvador. They met some Christians like us. Some were poor -- most were poor -- but yet they went with open eyes to serve Jesus. This parish raised over six thousand dollars so that those young people could go and be missionaries to bring Jesus' message from us to the poor of El Salvador. It made me cry.

Kindness, you know, can make you cry; but that is part of what the taking up of the cross of Jesus is all about. We love as Jesus loved. We don't try to repeal the great commandment to love one another, or the great commission to go out and make disciples of all. We try to live them out in our life. Oh, we backslide sometimes, just as Peter did; but by God's grace we pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off, and even more importantly, we hoist the cross back on our shoulder, and we seek to live as Jesus lived. That's who we are. That's what we do, and in all things we give God the glory.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs