

**LECTIONARY 22 (11PENT.) AUGUST 28, 2011 CYCLE "A"**

**TITLE: GOSPEL MEANS TO GIVE, TO WITNESS, TO RISK!**

**READINGS: Jer. 15:15-21, Ps. 26:1-8, Rom. 12:9-21, Matt. 16:21-28**

Last week we were talking about Peter. Actually Peter is probably the best known of the Apostles, at least the most prominent. Did you hear about the Sunday school teacher who was getting a little frustrated because she was not getting much of a response from her first year pupils? "Doesn't anyone know who Peter was?" she asked. A small girl's voice from the rear of the classroom piped up: "Wasn't he a wabbit?" It was in last week's Gospel reading that we heard Peter confess Jesus as "The Messiah, Son of the living God" and in turn, Peter was designated as the "rock" the rock of faith upon which Jesus built his church. We, too, are to be those rocks of faith today who know Jesus personally and upon whom the church, his body, continues to be built. In today's readings we move into a fuller understanding of just what it means to live the Gospel, to live the life of discipleship. This pericope from Matthew mirrors Mark 8:34-9:1, but omits a tiny yet significant word in the Greek (*tote*) which means "then". It connects the previous declaration of Peter to what follows, and it is very important. Then, following Peter's declaration and his designation as "rock", "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" Matt.16:21. That small word links the two sections together and makes one flow into the other. Now we are to live out just as Peter, our commission our designation as rocks of faith, to walk in the way of Jesus, living out the Gospel through discipleship.

It was also Peter whom Jesus asked a very important question, as he stood beside the Sea of Galilee, with his disciples: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Three times he asked, once for each time Peter had denied him. It is the same question Jesus asks each one of us: "Just how much do you love me?" And the consequence of loving him is this: "If you want to be my followers it takes love and commitment. Do you love me enough to walk in my footsteps? Do you love me enough to be known as one of my followers? If you do then you must be willing to take up your cross and follow me." For discipleship takes enough faith and love to become a witness, to risk, to bear a cross.

Just look at our reading from Jeremiah today. Of all the Old Testament prophets, he comes the closest to the New Testament understanding of what it means to be a bearer of God's Word and, if we make the connection, the cross of Christ. Jeremiah foreshadows the truth first emphasized by Paul that being a witness, living out one's discipleship, means suffering. It is in Jer.20:8 that he cries out, "The word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long." Jeremiah certainly lived this out. For even though only a boy when God called him, Jeremiah faithfully served the Lord and preached his Word. He suffered much for his faith in God. Some thought he was a heretic, others thought he was insane. His friends and family stayed away from him. Religious leaders called for his death. Jeremiah was depressed, angry and insecure. But he endured all the persecution and rejection. He was truly an Old Testament model of faithful discipleship.

And here in our Gospel selection today we see Peter vacillating in his commitment, even going so far as rebuking Jesus for saying things like he would suffer and even be killed. Peter is not living up to his position as "rock" his commitment to his faith. "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" Matt.16:23. We know that Peter did get behind Jesus, for this became his call to assume his proper place in following Jesus. It was his call to discipleship and Peter followed and became one of Jesus' totally faithful followers living out his mission as "rock" living his discipleship and even accepting crucifixion for his love of Christ.

That is the same call Jesus still issues to us today. "Get behind me and follow me." It may not be easy, it may and most likely, will involve the cross in some way, but it's worth the price. Jesus would suffer and die, and in dying he would have life and give life to us. And it is when we give of ourselves for Christ's sake, when we witness to our faith, when we live out the Gospel and even place ourselves at risk, we will find life. Jesus said to his disciples "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." Matt.16:24-25. There are hundreds of thousands of faithful Christians who have walked that way throughout the history of our church and hundreds of thousands of Christians today who are serving Christ around the world in full-time service, some at a considerable sacrifice. You might ask why they are willing to give up a comfortable living to serve Christ in far less desirable circumstances. And most of them will tell you it is not a sacrifice. It's not difficult to take up a cross and follow Christ, if you walk in his ways and share

his faith, if you are truly committed to him, if you know him and love him personally. When we give of ourselves for Christ's sake, when we witness to our faith, when we live out our discipleship, and even place ourselves at risk, we will find life, eternal life. That's the Good News, that's the Gospel! **Amen.**

**Pastor Barney**