

5 PENTECOST (LECTIONARY 13) JUNE 27,2010 CYCLE "C"

TITLE: LIKE CHRIST SET YOUR FACE ON JERUSALEM AND NEVER WAVER.

READINGS: 1Kings 19:15-16, Ps. 16, Gal. 5:1,13-25, Luke 9:51-62

During the 1940's and 50's there was a handicapped man who lived with his mother in Portland, Oregon. He suffered from muscular dystrophy, walked with a severe limp and was affected in his speech. He was the butt of jokes and tolerated by others as some kind of odd or retarded person. Many times he tried to secure a job and finally persuaded the Watkins Supervisor to give him the worst route in the city. Despite the fact that he didn't drive, he had to ride the bus to his route and walk every mile of it. He had to laboriously hand-write all his own accounts each day, as he faced rejection after rejection. But he became "Mr. Watkins Man" and extremely appreciated by the neighborhood community. Those who lived on his "worst route" in the city looked forward to his visits. After many years, because of his excellent work, he was designated "Salesman of the year" by the company and given a special award. One of the greatest lessons we learn from our Watkins man is his persistence and perseverance. He was focused on his goal and never gave up. Like "Mr. Watkins Man," we, too, as Jesus instructs us today, are to keep on keeping on, despite all odds. As Christ tells us in the Gospel reading, set your face on Jerusalem and never waver.

It is in our Gospel today that we see Jesus' determination in setting his face to go to Jerusalem and what it means for his followers who take the journey alongside him. We gain a beautiful insight when we compare Elijah's call of Elisha in our first reading to Jesus' call of his disciples. Look at what Elisha said when Elijah called him: "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." 1Kings 19:20. When Jesus called two to be his disciples, one said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Lk.9:59. Elijah allowed Elisha to return home and first kiss his parents good-bye. With Jesus' call it is different. All existing responsibilities to home and family have to be given up. With Jesus it is all or nothing. When Jesus said to the man "Follow me" he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.'" Lk.9:59-60.

There is another difference between the reading from 1Kings and our Gospel. Elijah chooses Elisha to succeed him for it says, "Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him." 1Kings 19:19. This means that Elisha will become a prophet like

his master only after he departs. We see this in 2Kings chapter 2 where Elijah is taken up into heaven in the chariot of fire and Elisha replaces him. But the difference with Jesus and our Gospel is this: When Jesus ascends to heaven, his followers do not replace him. They remain his followers, and he remains present as their living Lord.

So what is the point of all this? It is precisely this: Lifelong commitment is what we owe our God. If we are to imitate Jesus Christ as one of his faithful followers then we, too, need to set our face on the goal, Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God, and never waver. Commitment to Christ and to his people is not to be entered into halfheartedly. “As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ To another he said, ‘Follow me,’ But he said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead: but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.’ Still another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.’” Lk.9:57-62. Jesus has set down some pretty strict rules for us. Unfortunately some get all excited and worked up by a revival or some preacher’s sermon and invitation to come forward and confess Christ as their personal savior, but too often that commitment is temporary, too short-lived. When the hard part of commitment comes we cannot become weak. When we may find ourselves in the face of embarrassment, opposition, or ridicule, we must stand up and become true witnesses of our Christianity despite all odds.

Edith Dean’s book “Great Women of the Christian Faith” recounts the following:

In the early days of the church, countless people lost their lives as martyrs for Christ. Rather than weakening the Christian community, however, the stories of these suffering believers drew multitudes of people to the faith. One of these early martyrs was a young mother named Vibia Perpetua. Perpetua had an infant son to care for at the time, but no records exist of her husband. He may have died young, or he may have abandoned her after she converted. Both were common practices in those days.

Perpetua, a native of North Africa, was just twenty years old when she was imprisoned for giving her life to Christ. Fortunately, Perpetua was imprisoned with five other Christians. This small band of believers continued to worship God and uplift one another throughout this ordeal. They all remained strong in their faith, confident that they were doing God’s will. Perpetua reported that the suffering she experienced in prison only brought her closer to

God, and increased her joy and peace. Twice, Perpetua's father came to the jail and begged her to renounce her faith. He was from a noble, well-connected family, and he could have assured her freedom if she had cooperated. Though it broke her heart to refuse him, she held fast.

The day before they were executed, this tiny band of Christians gathered together and had an agape meal, an honored tradition in the early Church. Then, each of the believers was thrown in the arena with a wild animal. Most of the believers were gored to death, but the crowd protested at the sight of Perpetua's body covered in bloody wounds, so she was removed from the arena and beheaded by a soldier. Somehow they thought this was more humane than death at the mercy of an animal. We may think the story of Perpetua had a tragic, senseless ending, but it was examples of a steadfast faith like Perpetua's that inspired generations of believers after her.

You and I will probably never have our lives physically threatened because we follow Jesus, but doesn't the example of Perpetua stand as a rebuke to the tepid lives we live as followers of the cross? "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Set your face on Jerusalem and never waver! **Amen.**

Pastor Barney