

PROPER 17, PENTECOST 14, SEPTEMBER 3, 2023

Do you remember the Flip Wilson show from the early 70's? Do you remember the character he used to portray named Geraldine? There is an iconic skit he did as Geraldine where she came home to her husband after a shopping spree at the local mall. When she got in the door, her husband asked her, "Did you find anything?". "Well, there was this very expensive dress in the window, and I heard a little voice telling me, 'Go in and try it on.' So I did." The husband asked: "And then what...?" Geraldine said: "Well, I looked at myself in the mirror, and I heard this little voice whisper, 'You look fabulous in that dress.'" "Well," said her husband, "did you hear that little voice say, 'Get behind me, Satan?'" Geraldine replied, "Why, yes, I did. And he said, 'It looks fabulous from the back, too.' So I bought it."

In this morning's gospel Jesus tells Peter "Get behind me Satan". Now this rebuke comes right on the heels from last week's story when Jesus asked the disciples "Who do you say that I am" and Peter had responded with his resounding profession of faith by saying, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. And today as that story continues Jesus explains to his disciples what he means by the Messiah. And he tells them that the Messiah is going to suffer and die and then rise again.

Well, this didn't correspond with what Peter thought the Messiah should be. He felt the Messiah would sweep the Romans into the sea. He felt Jesus would cleanse the Temple from corruption and restore true worship. Talk of suffering and death wasn't what the Messiah was all about. So, Peter figured it was time to talk some sense into Jesus.

Jesus, of course, would have none of it. That's when he sharply rejected Peter's comments by telling him "Get behind me Satan." Now the word Satan in Hebrew means adversary. Satan is not a person rather Satan is a word used to describe any force which seeks to deflect us from the way of God; it is any influence which seeks to make us turn away from God; it is any power which seeks to make human desires take the place of God.

So, turning to Peter he in essence was telling him not to let his own personal feelings about the kind of Messiah Jesus should be get in the way. And he continues his lesson about the kind of Messiah he is by telling them whoever takes up their cross and follows him is a disciple. And by taking up the cross he is telling us that the ultimate test of our Christian discipleship, is not what we think about Jesus, not what we say about Jesus, but what we do about Jesus. In concrete terms, how does our relationship with Jesus affect the way we conduct our lives? How does our relationship with Jesus affect our relationships with others? How do we demonstrate our love for Jesus in the specific, nitty-gritty, down-to-earth events of our lives?

Inevitably, we are challenged to solidify the idea of being followers of Jesus so Jesus tells us to get with it and to act like His followers. He tells us to live according to His example by being doers of the Word and healers and reconcilers. He tells us to be a people of compassion; a forgiving people, peacemakers; to be co-creators of the Kingdom of Love; to be a people of joy!

The question is how well do we do that? There's a story about a clergyman strolling through the park who struck up a conversation with a soap salesman. They soon began to talk religion. The soap salesman said: "The Gospel you preach, doesn't

seem to have done much good after two thousand years. There is still a lot of evil and wickedness in the world." The clergyman pointed to a little boy making mud pies. The child was exceedingly dirty. "I can see that soap hasn't done much good either. It's been around for a long time but there are still a lot of dirty hands and faces." "That's true," said the soap salesman, "but soap, is effective only when it's applied." To which the clergyman replied, "So it is with the Gospel we proclaim."

The Gospel of Jesus is only effective when it's proclaimed. There is a meme that depicts a young man asking Jesus "So why do you allow things like hate, famine, war, suffering, disease, crime, homelessness, despair etc, to exist in our world? Jesus' response is, "Interesting that you should ask because I was about to ask you the exact same question."

Unfortunately, we fail sharply in being a true disciple. Last year the Episcopal Church released the results of a nationwide poll called "Jesus in America". 84% of the respondents that included those who considered themselves non-religious said Jesus was an important spiritual figure. Another question asked was what characteristics did the respondents associate with Christians. The words most chosen by the Christian respondents were "giving," "compassionate," "loving" and "respectful," while non-Christians associated Christians most with "hypocritical," "judgmental," "self-righteous" "arrogant," "unforgiving" and "disrespectful." That's a real disconnect of how we perceive ourselves versus how others do.

Pollsters also asked: "What values and lessons do you believe Jesus teaches?" "Love your neighbor" was the top response overall, then "Love your enemies" and "feed the hungry," only accounted for slightly more than 50%. When asked how well do Christians you know represent the values and teachings of Jesus 68% of non-religious said a little to none at all. And Christians who answered the poll, of course, believed 71% of them did. Obviously, most of Jesus' teachings does not compute for a lot of Christians.

A very telling question was which of the following activities do you find the most personally fulfilling. The activities listed were prayer, being outdoors, giving to charity, attending religious services. They divided the respondents into Catholic, Mainline Protestant, other Protestant, other Christian, Other religion and Non religious. Guess what activity scored first for all but two of these groups – outdoor activities meaning communing with nature. Also, only two groups - other protestants and other Christians listed attending church services as being personally fulfilling. All but non-religious listed prayer and all but two listed giving to charity. Non-religious said, they were personally fulfilled by being outdoors, giving to charity and listening to or participating in music. Mainline protestants listed being outdoors, prayer and giving to charity.

There is a real disconnect in not only how we perceive ourselves but what Jesus actually calls us to be and do. We really need to evaluate how we portray the Kingdom of God in our daily lives. We need to translate what we think about Jesus and what we say about Jesus into what we do about Jesus more intentionally.

Jesus tells us to take up his cross and follow him and to deny ourselves which isn't as appealing as preaching about material prosperity which undermines the teachings of Jesus, who emphasized humility, compassion, and the normalcy of suffering. There is nothing grim about the command "Take up, your cross daily." It is not intended to make us wince or clench our teeth. It is an invitation to experience the

joy of a living, working, growing relationship with the God of Love that is with us always. It is an invitation to experience the joy of realizing our true human potential moment-by-moment, day-by-day. It is an invitation to experience the joy of demonstrating our love for God through our love for one another.

And we do this when we give of ourselves. We offer ourselves when we take out our check book and give money away. We offer ourselves when we visit a nursing home or spend the evening with the family of a sick friend, or when we speak up when people make sexist or racist remarks or when we challenge derogatory comments or jokes.

When we take up our cross and follow Jesus we find that our lives are transformed. As the apostle Paul said, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Let us take up our cross so others will see that we take seriously the teachings of Jesus. Amen.