

## A New Way

One of the most persistent questions that gets asked in every generation is this:

"How are we to live out our faith?"

It's a question that's being asked at both Democratic and Republican conventions this year.

It's a question all of our mainline churches struggle with.

And it's at the root of the two part gospel lesson we finish this morning; with last week's reading being Part One.

How are we to live out our faith?

Last week Jesus asks the disciples:

"Who do YOU say that I am"?

Peter acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

And if you didn't know any better, you'd think everything'd be fine and dandy when we get to today's reading.

But no!

Today, Peter goes from being the rock on which Christ will build his church to the embodiment of the devil himself.

From pope to satan in one fell swoop!

Why?

Perhaps because when Peter acknowledges Jesus to be the Son of God, he's thinking, "Oh baby, life's gonna be really good for us!"

Big homes, nice cars, lots of money in the bank, because we're the insiders!

And as for all those outsiders out there, tough luck!

That kind of thinking sets up systems of judgment against other people.

That kind of thinking blesses our nation, our wars, our economy, and curses those not like us.

That kind of thinking was on display this past week at the Republican convention, and we see it in various ways in our Anglican communion, among our Roman brothers and sisters, and within the Orthodox tradition as well.

We are often quite at home with an understanding of faith as "people who are in the know" when it comes to salvation.

And if you aren't one of us, you're in trouble!

It's a way of seeing people of faith as "under siege."

People who need to resist the stain of entering the wider world.

So this past week, we heard how people of faith shouldn't have to bake cakes for gay folks weddings.

"It violates my religious freedom," they say.

People of faith shouldn't have to allow their employees to get contraception through insurance coverage.

"It violates my religious freedom," they say.

It's an "us against them" mentality, with clear lines between insiders and outsiders.

And while many of our Democratic friends resist **that** temptation, far too many think of faith as a highly personal place to seek comfort from the wounds of accidents, tragedy and disease that life often brings.

Faith as an inside job, that does little to challenge the injustices and disparities in the world.

And to both of these understandings of faith, Jesus says:

"There's a different way, a better way!

Because all that stuff... all those daydreams of you being oh so special, while most other folks are damned, that's the devil's work, not God's.

Your focus on you and yours, your privatizing the faith so it doesn't touch your Monday through Friday life, that's the stuff I'm here to fix, not to promote!

So sit down and listen to what it really means to follow the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

It means that there are no lines between people.

It means that God has no favorites — because everybody is God's favorite.

It means all of life is swept up in God — so there is no part of life that your faith must not touch.

And when it comes to judging each other?

Please don't!

That's what got everyone in trouble in the first place, when your first mother and father ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil!

You're not equipped to know the difference between good and evil, and you almost always mess it up every time you try to use it.

'It's why God appoints me,' Jesus says, 'as the sole judge, because I let wheat and chaff grow together.'

I haul in good fish and bad fish, because truth be told, the line between good and evil doesn't run between 'us and them,' it runs through the heart of every person, and every social system.'"

Jesus continues: "To follow the Living God means serving each other.

It means forgiving each other.

It means giving up your life for each other.

There's no Cadillacs, no mansions, no cash in the bank on this path.

But there is fellowship and compassion and beauty beyond your wildest dreams.

After all, what Cadillac compares to a sunrise?

What mansion holds a candle to a meadow filled with spring flowers?

How much money is a lung full of fresh air worth?

But there is this too.

You will get beauty – and you will also get pain.

'This is my way,' Jesus says to them.

To us.

Today.

It is the way of giving up.

Of letting go.

It's the way of trust.

The life of faith isn't made up of insiders who have all they need.

The life of faith is about reaching out to everyone in this world, secure in the knowledge that the Creator of all things, is present in all things.

That "truth" doesn't belong to any one group or club, but that everyone can be a source of truth, beauty, and compassion.

And because of that, we are invited into a life of freedom that is hard to imagine.

The freedom to lose ourselves in service to one another.

The freedom to forgive rather than to hate.

The freedom to embrace, rather than reject.

The freedom to risk illness or poverty or even death, all because, no matter our doubts, no matter our fears, no matter our best thinking, our hope is in the crucified one; the one whom death could not defeat.

As one priest says:

“The deep secret of Jesus’ hard words to us in this passage is that our fear of suffering and death — robs us of life.

Because fear of death always turns into fear of life.

It’s a stingy, cautious way of living — which is not really living at all.

The deep secret of Jesus’ hard words is that the way to have abundant life isn’t to save it — but to spend it!

To give it away!

Because life cannot be shut up and saved.

Any more than a bird can be put in a shoebox and stored on the closet shelf.” B.B. Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, 79.

And this of course is the constant struggle that we endure throughout our lives.

Moving from what we instinctively reach for, as the disciples did last week, when it comes to our obsessions with controlling people, places and things, and to surrender all of that so that we may sit at the feet of the Living God.

The God who is completely different from what we expect.

Who accepts the unacceptable.

Who loves the unlovable.

We gather here each Sunday in order to remember our common story.

And yet, there is another, more fundamental reason, why we find ourselves here week after week.

We come together every Sunday so that we can find encouragement to follow this strange way of Jesus.

We come to learn to spot, and decline, those temptations to follow the easier way.

The way of "us against them."

The way of judgment and condemnation and hate.

The devil's way indeed.

Don't feel bad if this way of Jesus takes a lifetime to wrap our arms around.

If men as great as St. Peter and St. Paul can struggle with these things throughout their whole lives, so shall we.

And so, beloved, how are we to live out our faith?

Perhaps by heeding the wisdom of Paul.

That we may "rejoice in hope.

Be patient in suffering.

Persevere in prayer.

That our love may be genuine; holding fast to what is good.

That we love one another."

When your faith is lived in this way, you are assured that the blessing of almighty God is with you, always and forever.

+amen

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