

EMPTY

Sermon for Pentecost 12A-Mt 16:21-28

LPC, 8/31/14

Have you ever been on a diet, really trying to be good, and a well-meaning friend says something like: “Oh, you look depressed. Have a slice of my nice lemon meringue pie!” It doesn’t have to be a lemon meringue pie, just anything you really, really crave and mustn’t have. At times like this, it may be very hard not to reply, “Of course I’m depressed! I’ve been living on nine calories a day! Give me a freaking break!”

If you can identify with this scenario, you may be able to understand why Jesus is so harsh with Peter in today’s Gospel story from Matthew. At this point in the narrative, Jesus knows he is going to have to go to Jerusalem, where he will face death. There is nothing in the world Jesus would rather do than skip this outcome. We know this from a later scene in the story, where Jesus prays that this cup pass from his mouth. And here is well-meaning Peter telling him, “Oh, you look depressed. You don’t have to go to Jerusalem and die!” That Jesus responds with such heat, “Get behind me, Satan,” is an indicator of how badly he wants to accept what Peter offers.

Now obviously Jesus is tense because he’s got a tough job ahead of him in Jerusalem. But there’s more to his touchiness than that. Time is running out on Jesus’ earthly ministry, and people just aren’t getting it. Oh, they get the healing part, and they’re wowed by the miracles, they know that Jesus is favored by God, and one or two, like Peter, are making the connection between Jesus and the Messiah, God’s promised deliverer.

And everyone has a clear picture of the Messiah. The Messiah is the one who is going to make everything all right ... all right for *our* people ... all right for *us* ... all right for *me*.

Jesus really is in a heck of a bind. He really loves people. He knows how much they suffer. He wants to make things all right for every individual. But what he has been sent to do is bigger than that. What he has been sent to do is to make the universe all right. And to do that he has to give up everything.

The lesson for us in this story has to do with being careful with our expectations of Jesus. Jesus does not exist to please us, or to conform to our expectations. Jesus exists to save the world.

Jesus wants us to call on him in our needs and sorrows. Jesus responds in love. Jesus sanctifies our suffering. Jesus gives us what we need. Jesus also calls us to follow him in a life of self-sacrifice so that we can participate with him in saving the world.

There is a theological concept here that is instructive in how we do this. It’s called *kenosis*. Kenosis means “self-emptying.” Strictly speaking, kenosis as a doctrine refers to Christ’s self-emptying. Jesus Christ was (and is) fully God, and yet became fully

human. Scripture shows many instances where Jesus is limited in his knowledge and abilities. Jesus' self-emptying, Jesus' kenosis, consisted in his setting aside his divine abilities in order to fully experience everything that humans experience.

Jesus' self-emptying becomes a model for those of us who would follow Jesus. Jesus emptied himself of his divinity in order to become human. We do not possess the same divinity that Jesus had. So what do we need to empty?

Here I will refer to my hero, St. Ignatius Loyola. Ignatius would say that what we need to divest is our attachments. Attachments, according to Ignatius, are those things upon which we hang our thoughts, attitudes, habits, behaviors or beliefs. On what does our happiness depend? On what does our equilibrium depend? Sometimes we don't even know what these things are until they are challenged or threatened.

In Jesus' day, people were attached to their own ideas of what the Messiah was. The Messiah would free them from Roman rule. The Messiah would do away with sickness and poverty. The Messiah would approve of strict religious practices. When Jesus came along and did none of these things, people got upset.

What ideas about Jesus are we attached to today? That Jesus will solve all our problems? That Jesus loves us better when we play by the rules? That Jesus will see to it that we don't have to suffer?

Our attachments can actually be helpful to us for periods of time. If they were not helpful, we would not have formed them. However, attachments often outlive their helpfulness. Ultimately our attachments keep us centered on ourselves. Margaret Silf, Ignatian scholar, puts it this way:

It takes a lot of courage to recognize the truth that we ourselves are not the fixed center of the things but rather that we are beings through whom life flows. But when we do understand and acknowledge this, we discover that our emptiness will lead us more surely to our true purpose than our imagined fullness ever could because God's life and grace will flow so much more fully and freely through empty hands.

The thing is, as Silf explains, the more we empty ourselves of our own attachments the more room we have for God.

Think of your soul as a goblet that you fill with the soda pop of your own wants, expectations and attitudes. Soda pop is sweet. It tastes good and has a stimulating fizz. It also has no nutritional value other than simple hydration. It also has stuff in it that is bad for you if you consume too much, like refined sugar, artificial flavors and, often, caffeine. If you want the rich red wine of God's abundant life, you need to pour out the soda pop. (Don't take this analogy too far. It's possible to have too much wine. It's not possible to have too much of God's grace.)

To self-empty as Jesus self-emptied does not guarantee freedom from pain. The freedom self-emptying allows is freedom to live fully, and freedom to love truly.