

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: September 3, 2017

Proper 17: Matthew 16: 21-28: *Hard Work and Sweat Is the Way of the Cross*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was about 12 years old, I wanted to put up a basketball hoop in the backyard. I was going to nail the hoop to a large tree. So, I grabbed a chair and 5 large boxes and stacked them on top of the chair. I stuck the hammer in my belt and put the nails in my pocket and held onto the basketball hoop with one hand. With the other hand, I climbed up this very shaky ladder and somehow got to the top. As soon as I tried to place the basketball hoop against the tree, I lost my balance and began to fall. As I fell, I had the presence of mind to break the fall by extending my left hand and arm. I hit the ground hard but my arm did not fracture. However, I hyper extended my baby finger tearing it wide open where the finger and hand articulate. It bled profusely. I ran into the house and my mother took one look at it and said, “You have to go the emergency room for stitches.” I told Mom I didn’t want to go to the

hospital. She said, “Your finger is ready to fall off. You’re going. I will call your father and he will meet us there.” In the emergency room, I met Dr. Edward Asprinio, a friend of my fathers’. He was a big burly man with a booming voice. But, I will never forget how gentle, and kind he was as he went about suturing my finger. What I really remember the most was our conversation. After I told him about my accident, he asked what I thought was a very strange question from someone I didn’t know. He asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up? I said, “I want to be a priest.” He said, “We need good priests and we need good doctors. You know, you could be both. You could serve God and God’s people as a priest and a doctor” I asked, “How could I do both?” He said, “It would be a lot of hard work and sweat, but whether you become a priest or a doctor or both, serving God always takes a lot of hard work and sweat. He continued, “I was not the smartest guy in my class. Nothing came easy to me, academically. But, I was the guy in the class who worked the hardest. Serving God is the very best thing in this life and the best of things in this life will always require hard work and sweat.” I never forgot it and I never forgot Dr. Edward Asprinio.

I want to talk with you this morning about what I call, “the lure of the easy way.” In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus and His disciples are in Caesarea Philippi. Their ministry to this point had been a stunning success. Crowds pressed in

on them everywhere they went. People eagerly reached out to touch this attractive young rabbi from Nazareth. The disciples themselves were caught up in the excitement of it all. Jesus asked them, "Who do you say I am?" and Simon Peter answered enthusiastically, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" It was one of the most dramatic moments in the disciples' journey with Jesus.

Then Jesus changed the subject. He began to tell them that the crowds would soon turn against Him; He would be crucified, on the third day he would be raised. The disciples didn't know what to make of all this. Simon Peter took Jesus aside: "God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you." Jesus' response to Simon Peter is as harsh as any words in the New Testament: "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on Divine but on human things."

My sisters and brothers in Christ, Jesus called Simon Peter 'Satan' because of His experience in the wilderness immediately after His baptism by John. In contemporary speech, we would say that it was there in the desert that Satan revealed to Jesus the way to make a million dollars in three easy steps: First, turn stones to bread. Second, leap off the pinnacle of the temple. Third, bow down and worship me. I do not see Satan as a red caped devil with a pitchfork, horns and tail sporting a Van Dyke. I see Satan as a smooth talking

devil dressed in a \$1,400 suit selling in a glib and polished fashion the easy pathway to instant success, to instant wealth, to instant fame, to instant glamour, and instant gratification. We can see Satan almost everywhere today. Jesus encountered Satan this time in Simon Peter: "God forbid it Lord that you should have to suffer and die."

My sisters and brothers, if there is any doubt that Jesus is resisting the lure of the easy way, listen to the words that follow: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

My sisters and brothers, many of us today are making the mistake of following the easy way. We see it in our family life. Homes are disintegrating because a father or a mother decides one day that enough is enough and simply walks out. Being a parent is hard work and a lot of sweat.

We see and experience lots of hard work and sweat in our places of employment. However, it is nice to see that the work ethic has regained respectability. Many of us can remember when young people dreaded taking their place in the business world. That attitude was frequently reflected in the Doonesbury cartoon years back that had Zonker Harris noticing a despondent student coming out of the library. Zonker asked, "What's the problem?" The student replied, "It's nothing anybody can do anything about. It's just that tomorrow I'm graduating and on Monday I'm assuming a

position as a junior vice president of the Chase Manhattan Bank of New York." Zonker is immediately shocked and saddened and says, "Hey, man, I'm sorry. I didn't know." Those were the seventies. But all that has changed. Today many people would sell their soul to be a junior vice president of Chase Manhattan and according to recent news reports many of them have, so much so, Newsweek magazine asks on its cover, "Whatever happened to ethics?" We are working harder than ever, but we are still lured by the easy way.

There are two important truths. The first truth is that the path to personal success is that of self-denial. I remember visiting the Washington Monument years ago. As I approached it, I heard a guide announcing loudly that there would be a two hour wait to ride the elevator to the top of the monument. However, with a smile on his face the guide then said, "There is no waiting to go to the top if you are willing to take the stairs." Successful people know that there is no limit to what a healthy, reasonably intelligent person in this society can accomplish if he or she is willing to "climb the stairs." The opportunity is there for anyone willing to pay the price. Success in life requires a willingness to resist the lure of the easy way. Our goals require sacrifice, they require perseverance, they require determination, and they require hard work and sweat. Every one of us in this church knows that the path to personal success is the path of self-denial.

The second truth is that self- denial is essential to the salvation of the world. So, here is the challenge. Our world has always faced tremendous challenges. Today is no different. The cynic asks, “Is there only one who cares enough to act? The cynic answers, “No, not one because when the going gets tough, everyone leaves.” That happened to Jesus. As the way became harder, the numbers of those who followed dwindled until finally He died alone on Calvary with the exception of His mother, Mary Magdalene, the women who were always there and John, the youngest apostle. Just think about this. If Jesus had been unwilling to lay down His life, the world would never have known about God’s love for all of us. If those early disciples had not picked up Jesus' cross and followed after Him, the world still would not know about God’s love for us and if you and I do not pick up the cross in our time and make those hard choices and assume those difficult responsibilities our children's children will not know the ancient story of Jesus and God’s great love for them.

Richard Leaky, the famous anthropologist who worked in northern Kenya, discussed in his book, People of the Lake, what it is that separates the human person from the great apes. It is not human kind’s intelligence, says Leakey, but our generosity. Only human beings have the ability to share. Only human beings are capable of genuine compassion. Only human beings are capable of

laying down their lives for a friend. When it comes to taking up the cross of self-denial, however, many of us have not discovered our humanity. If we don't care what happens to this world, who will? If we don't feed the hungry, who will? If we don't shelter the homeless, who will? If we don't tell the world about Christ, who will?

I recall the words of General William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army and a friend to the down and out. Three months, before his death he wrote: "While women weep as they do now, I'll fight; while little children go hungry as they do now, I'll fight; while men go to prison, in and out, in and out, as they do now, I'll fight; while there is a drunk left, while there is a poor lost girl upon the streets, while there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight and fight to the very end." Can you imagine General Booth writing a book entitled Looking out for Number One? What has happened to us? "If any man or woman would be my disciple," Jesus says to us, "Let then deny them self and take up their cross and follow me." That is the word we desperately need to hear. It is a call to walk the road less travelled. It is the call to climb the lonely stairs as opposed to the crowded elevator. It is the hard work and sweat of commitment. Or as Jesus himself once said, it is the narrow way that only a committed few will pursue, many are called, but few are chosen. So, how about you? The road to personal success is the road of self-

denial. Self-denial, however, is also essential to the salvation of the world.

That is Jesus call and challenge to our lives today. Can God count on you?

Will you take up your cross today and commit your life to the hard work and sweat of the mission of your Holy Trinity Church to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to care for the sick, to visit the imprisoned, to bury the dead and that my sisters and brothers is how the disciple of Jesus Christ saves the world. AMEN