

## **Lent 2B and Proper 19B**

Paul comes to us this morning with what should be a radical proclamation: that since we have been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ! Peace with God! Can we even imagine that?

Many American "Christians" don't question this – it sort of goes without saying; we assume peace with God as a given. We live day to day with very little thought about whether there is anything wrong with our relationship with God because we give very little to thought to that relationship at all! Affluence, power, relationship to others, are all taken as signs of our "blessedness"! God, we assume, would not keep sustaining us unless our relationship was in good shape – it's the pompous, jingoistic, arrogant proclamation "God Bless America!" spoken as a defiant pronouncement rather than as cry of distress, a prayerful cry for help.

We assume "peace" because we can't imagine (don't want to admit) that we're conflict with the will of God at all! Instead, we assume it based on a rationalization that says, "Of course I have peace with God because I haven't done anything so terrible as to not have that peace – that He should be upset with me! He doesn't have a real reason not to like me!" We can't entertain the thought – at least on our own, without this Word that comes at us – that there might be something so wrong with us that would effect our relationship with God!

We have an arrogance of our own "Okay-ness"! "Okidokiness"! It's a creeping universalism – everybody's OK with God: "I'm OK, you're OK; God's our Father, let's go play!"

Oh, but we're very capable of seeing or entertaining the thought that there might be something wrong with God! We forever toy with the notion that the problem is not with our sin, but with the way God chooses to be God! We believe on some level that with a little help from us, God could do a better job of being God! That's hardly being at peace with God!

But true peace with God does not necessarily come in simplistically acknowledging the absolute sovereignty\* of God either. That, too, unfortunately, opens the door to questioning his actions: since (not "if" in this case, but since) God *could* snap his fingers and cure everything that is wrong with the world, then why doesn't he? That final move is where we make our mistake! And once more we realize we're no longer at peace with God at all.

Upholding Absolute sovereignty can also become a very convenient device for sidestepping any responsibility for anything in our world! If God is responsible, there's no need to confront the reality of our entire way of life is unhealthy and rebellious. If we put everything in God's hands, there's no need to acknowledge that an entire planet's misuse of its resources has an impact on the whole creation!

We make natural disasters out to be "acts of God". But then we're left with trying to find peace with a \*God who sends disease, fires, earthquakes, and allows school shootings. And that is completely out of the reach of sinners!

If we were uneasy with the concept of having peace with God from Paul's letter to the Romans, the gospel does not immediately offer us much relief! Peter, having just correctly identified his Lord and the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ, is trying to show what he believes is support for Jesus. It's a natural reaction: do whatever possible to silence such a terrible story of impending death. But his very normal response is met with an awful rebuke. Peter is getting in Jesus way. Once again, because of sin, we think we know more than we know and that we know more than God. We think we know what it is to be the Sovereign Lord, and it sure doesn't look like being rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and being killed.

Even at our very best when we're trying to make a contribution like Peter, we're still sinners to our very core. Like Peter, we're pretty sure we know more about what it is to be God. And when we do this, like Peter, we get in the way of the gospel.

It gets worse! Jesus turns to the topic that everybody wants to talk about in churches these days: Discipleship!

In our own hands this passage turns discipleship into a project that we have to complete; about how we have to become disciples *if* we want the promises of Christ to be for us. The trouble of course is that we're sinners and we're not that good at following where Jesus leads! Our talk of discipleship tends to involve a course we've charted for ourselves with our own set of goals, our own ideas about how things out to be done and our own signs for assessing how far we've come. We come up with lists and characteristics and give them pious sounding names, like "Marks of Discipleship". Then we come up with ways to see how we're doing. Where's the "*peace with God*" in that???

The problem is that we can't do the very first thing that Jesus demands in order for us to become those disciples: deny ourselves! It's just not on our agenda! What does this even mean? What does this look like? We'll hear Peter doing some "denying" later in Mark's gospel, but he won't be denying himself! He'll be protecting himself by denying Jesus; everything about Jesus! That he knew him, traveled with him, etc...

Deny ourselves: what? Like, not invite ourselves over? Not admit that we're here with ourselves? Deny that we have anything to do with our own behavior? What comes so easy to us with regard to others, is impossible to do with regard to ourselves. Because no matter what else we bring to the party, we always bring ourselves!

But this is what Jesus requires: "If you want to be my disciples, deny yourself." and we can't put any kind of measuring stick on that. As soon as we start to try to measure it, we become hyper-aware of ourselves, entirely focused on ourselves; and we're back to square one. When we think of discipleship as a project that we are undertaking, we are setting our mind on "earthly things"; focused on ourselves: blind to God and to our neighbor.

Discipleship in this text and in ourselves is an identity placed upon us by Christ Jesus: he makes his disciples. We don't need to go looking for a cross: the cross finds Jesus' disciples. We don't need to go looking for ways to lose our life for his sake. Our old life of sin is stripped away from us in the waters of our baptism and replaced by a new and everlasting life

Interesting that "deny ourselves" language comes up during Lent. It doesn't mean to give up ice cream for the next five weeks, nor go in search of a life of hardship. It means nothing more or nothing less than being gripped by the reality that our lives and our righteousness and our salvation are not the fruits of our own labors, but the gifts of our merciful savior.

It's to see the desperate situation that our life has created and trust someone else to rescue us from it. Making disciples is Jesus' work and he's up to the task. He's picked out his disciples, not because he's seen our potential and hoped we'd live up to it. It's not a test to see who would hold up their end of the bargain. It's not as some preliminary offer subject to certain terms and conditions...not as some new covenant

He picks out his disciples, and he takes our life and gives us new ones – ones that are untouched by the sin and shame of this old one. That's peace with God.

