

Sunday, August 30, 2020
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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We don't know what Peter hoped to accomplish by second guessing Jesus in today's reading from Matthew 16. But we do know it did not go over well. Jesus scolds Peter harshly for, as Jesus put it, "setting his mind not on divine things but on human things."

As harsh as our Lord's reaction was, maybe we can understand Peter's intention. He didn't want to see Jesus suffer and die. No one did, except for his worst enemies. And as accustomed as we have become to the idea of the punctuation mark of the cross in our Lord's story, to Peter it was unfathomable. Sure, Jesus had angered and confronted enough powerful people it was possible, but God forbid it, especially for the one who was, as Peter was convinced, the messiah. You'll remember last week's gospel lesson from earlier in this chapter when Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter, raised his hand saying, "you are the messiah". And like that, the golden buzzer was pressed, and the confetti fell from above and Peter was awarded all kinds of praise from Jesus himself. "Peter", Jesus says, "you are my rock, upon which I will build my church!"

It's awesome. Peter saw Jesus, not only as a rabbi who had a knack for shaking things up, refreshing old laws in the fresh light of God's love, but he saw him as the messiah, the anointed one, our deliverer. That's amazing and, also, why is that so remarkable? I mean, why didn't everyone see that? Israel was full of people hoping for a messiah during those difficult days of Roman occupation. They had studied the scriptures and prayed for a savior. Thousands had met Jesus, seen what he could do. Why is it that so many people miss the messiah when he was right in front of them?!

A study was done at Harvard in the 1990's in which test subjects are shown a 1½ minute video of six people in motion passing two balls among them. They are dressed in black and white uniforms. Test subjects were then asked how many times the balls were successfully passed between the players dressed in white. The study finds that the subjects were barely able to keep up with the movement, and the vast majority guess correctly: fifteen times. The two balls are passed 15 times between the players in white.

Now, where the study gets interesting is when the subj. were asked what they thought of the gorilla. The what?! Turns out, more than half of the test subject failed to see a grown man in full gorilla costume stroll into the middle of the play, stopping to pound his chest and then stroll out after having spent nine seconds in the center of the action. 9 seconds. Really, you can Google it! The Harvard researchers call the phenomena of not seeing what is right in front of us "selective attention". We call it reality. If we don't know to look for something,

then we don't see it. We can't see it: our keys, our cell phones, now our masks. Police reports show this to be the most often given excuse after a car accident. "Officer I just didn't see them there". Apparently, it's a very real and pressing affliction that plagues many of us. We may look but we do not see. We may watch but we do not comprehend. Or as the old saying goes, the wonder of the exodus story is not that Moses saw a burning bush. The wonder is how many burning bushes Moses passed until he noticed that one?

Lord knows we are imperfect and fragile creatures. As a community, we are reminded of that in broken limbs and wounded spirits. We have watched each other fight debilitating depressions and long-term illnesses. We didn't need a pandemic to tell us how much we need each other and the healing hand of God and medicine. And we take comfort in the fact that scripture tells us that no illness is too small or great, for the compassionate reach of our Lord. Even death can't outrun God. And thanks be to God for that. And interestingly, of all the human afflictions to which Jesus attended according to scripture, blindness is one of the most frequent. I say interesting, only because left up to us, we might not have put blindness at the top of the urgent care list. Until, we read the scriptures in the original Greek. The verb *horea* which is translated as sight, actually has a deeper meaning. Yes, it means to see, as in to have eyesight. But it also means to see in the sense of having divine sight and understanding. Over and over in Jericho, Bethsaida, Galilee, and Jerusalem Jesus blesses men and women with the gift of *horea*: divine sight and understanding.

Perhaps the final line of today's gospel reading is not as much a reach as it first sounds: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." When you put it that way, don't we all want that kind of healing?

I was a prison chaplain for 7 years. And in the early years, I had the pleasure of working alongside a Catholic priest named Gregory. Gregory is a faithful and gentle man who wore linen clothes and rope sandals. A sartorial look few can pull off. He devoted his life to serving Jesus, whom, I swear, he looked for in every person he met. The way he treated people was magnetic, and I tagged along with him to prisons all over Virginia.

We once visited a middle-aged man with the nickname Tiny, who was serving a life sentence in Greensville Correctional Center. Tiny was enormous. His skin was scarred by tough living and cheap tattoos. And he looked as hard and mean as the razor wire around us. There were no visitors in this part of the prison, it was only because of the respect the guards had for Gregory that we could get in to see Tiny. We weren't allowed to give Tiny anything, all Gregory had to give was his attention and affection. After the usual 15 minutes was up, he asked Tiny if he minded if we stayed for a while, and he laughed, responding, "I'll have my secretary clear my calendar".

For the next several hours, we talked, listened, laughed, and watched as Tiny relaxed, opened up and well, recovered his humanity. To be clear, Gregory wasn't there to cheer Tiny up or to change him. He genuinely enjoyed the chance to love Tiny in his humanity, which in Gregory's world, means divinity. And in the light of that loving gaze, healing began. For what

may have been the first time this man was known and loved. And it made all the difference in the world. For years, Gregory stayed faithful in his visits until the end of Tiny's earthly life. And somehow I am sure they will remain connected into eternal life, as well. It still astounds me that, while Gregory gave Tiny nothing, no special treatment, no change in his sentence, no good food, or even a proper bed to sleep on, I watched as Tiny's whole being was transformed in the faithful gaze of Gregory simply seeing him. I mean really seeing him.

Perhaps the reason why Jesus was so upset with Peter for, "setting his sights on human things." was that he knew that human things will never lead us to the kingdom of God.

Human things will never overcome sin or the grave.

Human things will forever sell people short and dismiss them without hesitation.

Human things will keep us blind even when we are convinced we see with 20/20 vision.

Perhaps Jesus came so that some standing here who will not taste death before we see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Brothers and sisters, I join you in prayer for the healing of the world, from all manner of disease and affliction. And I pray especially for our blindness. May we never again fail to see as God sees, to know as God knows and to understand as only God understands. And when the Son of Man is stands before us, in whatever form, may we see and know and believe.

AMEN.