

Sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost
September 3, 2023
Grace Church, Muncie
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Come, Spirit of the Living G-d. Come upon us. Come upon me. And let some word of mine be some word of yours for some one of yours, in the most holy name of Jesus, who walks with us, even when we may not experience the same outlook at the same time. Amen.

There once was a circus owner who was approached by a member of the community the circus had stopped in. This citizen was looking for work. The local says they have an act the circus just can't live without. The circus owner agrees to let this person audition. So, this person climbs to the top of a tent pole, jumps off from it, and immediately starts flapping their arms. They are able to fly and to soar, to swoop, and almost to graze the seating area. After a few minutes of these aerial acrobatics, they perform a beautiful landing and ask for the circus owner to tell them what they think about what they had just experienced. The owner, unamused by what has just happened, said, "So, that's all you do? Bird imitations!." Not quite the expected reaction, but certainly another way of seeing this person's gift of flight.

During our two most recent Sunday sermons here, perspective has been a subtle, yet vital, undertone. Steve geographically propelled us through the re-invigoration of Jesus's Gentile ministry through a Canaanite mother. Last week, Father Paul chronologically brought us through many millennia of the re-invigoration of G-d's ministry among us, with us, and to us through a pharaonic daughter, two Hebrew midwives, and two of the most noteworthy sons of the tribe of Benjamin. It is all in how the people and places in the text—or the people and places who are reading, marking, and inwardly digesting the text—are perceiving or experiencing the text. This week, on the other hand, this concept is all too present and forward for us and the apostles.

Today, Matthew continues our look at the relationship between Simon (now Peter) and Jesus, but, with a shift in perspective – “From that time on.” We are the 'flies-on-the-wall' with Jesus and his closest disciples, yet not with more awe-inspiring works and signs and definitions lived before us, but with a new, gut-wrenching revelation presented to us. There is a move from what others and even the disciples think about Jesus to what is actually going to happen to Jesus and, ultimately, to themselves. Even though Jesus is the Messiah (way more than the prophets most people were perceiving him to be) he is still fully human—fully capable of being plotted against by the Establishment, betrayed, and executed. More focused on that than the resurrection in three days Jesus adds at the end of the new to-do list, the newly re-named Peter puts in his two unsolicited denarii about this change.

Sooner, rather than later, Peter **will** be given those keys and the disciples will be living their lives not *with* Christ, but *in* Christ. To say that this is a lot of responsibility and a lot of change is a massive understatement. Quite the bombshell to drop.

As we all have experienced and known, human beings and change aren't usually as complimentary as thunder and lightning. Peter is **perennially** and **perniciously** eager to keep the status quo: let's build tents on this mountain and live here with the prophets of old, let's see just how much Jesus means by his words and acts of radical love and forgiveness, let's fight to keep Jesus from being arrested. Peter is no longer looking with eyes that see the long-term but now is looking with eyes that see only what is in front of his face.

Gone will be the preaching to the thousands on rural hills, come will be glaring eyes of the Temple in the bustling throngs of urbanity that was first-century Jerusalem. While the disciples and Jesus have been of and among the fringes and margins of society; the disciples then, now, and forever are to be the fringes and margins of society—those looking with eyes that see the long-term, not looking with eyes that see only what is in front of their faces. To see what life could be, given a G-d-filled perspective, not what life currently is with its broken systems and uneven definition of justice.

Placing our readings into the perspective of our secular calendar, tomorrow finds many people with a day of rest to recognize what the regular, everyday worker has contributed to bring America to where it is today. Not only have the backs of millions built and made and served and generated all that we have, but also the strides for equality they have fought for. While perceived as losses of labor and profits to those in power, no longer having 16-hour days, 6-days per week at low wages or even in perpetual debt to the company has given the bulk of the workforce a better ability to be more whole people and healthier people. Granted, the work for the best-case scenario is far from over—for example, we are currently on day 124 for the writers and day 45 for the actors unions strikes, respectively, to not only improve wages and working conditions, but also to protect the members from technological intrusions and open more roads for more people in that industry to receive union protection.

Saint Paul puts this shift to long-term-sighted-ness in the perspective of love. Embrace good things, let go of those things that aren't. Confront evil and hate with love and generosity. Where there is normally one-ups man-ship, let there be companionship. We are all in this together and perpetuating division does no one any good. As Father Paul described, the Nicene Creed's wording has been seen in the past as safe and distant, that is not how the life of the faithful is set out to be. We are called to soar like an eagle, not merely to produce a bird imitation. To put it in the present tense, “from now on” the life of a Christ-follower is more than just dusty roads, stormy seas, and borrowed rooms. It can and very well could be downright fatal.

Twentieth-century dissident and one of the leaders of the German Confessing Church, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote in his book Life Together, that “[it] is not that God's help and presence must still be proved in our life; rather God's presence and help have been demonstrated for us in the life of Jesus Christ. It is in fact more important for us to know what God did ... in God's Son Jesus Christ, than to discover what God intends for us today. The fact that Jesus Christ died is more important than the fact that I will die.

And the fact that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead is the sole ground of my hope that I, too, will be raised on the day of judgment.” To be free of having to prove time after time who the G-d of radical love is and how the G-d of radical welcome moves gives us more space to be more truly Christ-like—to be a part of the Divine process and out of the oppression of the Establishment that only finds security by destabilizing those unlike it.

We pray in the Collect for Labor Day that G-d has “so linked our lives one with another that all we do affects, for good or ill, all other lives: So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good; and, as we seek a proper return for our own labor, make us mindful of the rightful aspirations of other workers, and arouse our concern for those who are out of work; through Jesus Christ our L-rd, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one G-d, for ever and ever. *Amen.*”