

Pentecost 16B 12 September 2021
Mark 8:27-38; James 3:1-12
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus] asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Let's pray:

There are moments when I wonder if the only thing that unites people today, is disillusionment. It seems to be a common disease we all suffer from... Hands up if you're disillusioned with our political leaders and the current state of affairs. Hands up if you're disillusioned with the lack of economic or employment opportunities. Hands up if you're disillusioned with the prospect of ever owning your own home. Hands up if you're disillusioned with endless wars and violence, prejudice and oppression, religion and the Church. Hands up if you're disillusioned with disillusionment. Now I'm confused (smile).

I suspect disillusionment is the main thing that influences how people in this country vote at elections. "That mob's been in too long. I'm sick o' the sight of 'em. I'm gonna' vote for the other lot this time. I reckon they'll do a better job." Do they? Ever? Behind the vitriol of political advertising and spin doctoring, lies disillusionment. It's what drives all these movements we're currently inundated with. It's what makes us heartbroken and angry about scandals in the Church. Disillusionment is all over the media. Disillusionment creeps into our own conversations. It's easy to recognise in the decline of church attendance and the church's influence on societal values.

Disillusionment happens when the story we've told ourselves, on which we've based our lives, to which we've wholeheartedly committed ourselves, no longer makes sense, is no longer relevant, no longer works, or is no longer true. Disillusionment is that no man's land between when we've lost faith in the old, familiar story but haven't yet embraced a new one. It leaves us panicked and fearful about the future. The world feels like a dangerous and chaotic place. Everything's out of control and somebody needs to do something about it.

Sound familiar? Do you ever find yourself in the twilight zone, where nothing makes sense?

However, disillusionment isn't only about what's going on around us. It begins in here (inside us). It's a spiritual issue. And it's one Peter knows well. In today's gospel, Peter is a poster boy for disillusionment.

Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah. He has a particular story about who the Messiah is and what the Messiah should do and be about. Jesus, on the other hand, rewrites Peter's story. "The Son of Man," he says, "must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." So much for Peter's expectation of the Messiah.

He neither expects or wants what he hears Jesus declaring. So, he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. In Matthew's gospel, we hear what Peter says to Jesus. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you" [16:22]. Peter obviously knows better than Jesus.

Can you imagine Peter's bewilderment? With the same tongue in the same conversation, Peter confesses and Peter rebukes. He's speaking with a forked tongue, or as otherwise expressed, out of both sides of his mouth. James describes exactly this in today's epistle [3:1-12].

If you hang around me for any length of time, you'll likely hear blessing and cursing coming from the same mouth. "With" the tongue, James says, "we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God."

The forked tongue is a symptom of our internal division and we project this division onto the world outside. We reveal our discontentment and disillusionment. And we reveal our arrogance. More often than not our disillusionment comes with the arrogance that we know exactly how things should be done in order to get XYZ outcome.

“My brothers and sisters,” James continues, “this ought not to be so.” We know that, don’t we? James states the obvious, “This ought not to be so.” Our disillusionment isn’t an excuse to curse or rebuke others. It’s not a basis for claiming we know better than others. And it’s not a reason to treat others as less than ourselves, especially when they’ve been created by the same loving God who created and loves us.

And arrogance can quickly lead to self-assertion. We can see that in Peter and his rebuke of Jesus. I’m not criticising or judging Peter, rather, recognising and identifying my own disillusionment, arrogance and self-assertion. I can be very difficult to get along with when I know I’m right and they’re wrong! You should hear how I carry on when I’m watching the State of Origin. Best rugby league ref. ever, I am. Hands up if you’re an armchair expert like me. I reckon we’ve got a lot of mates.

Jesus has no time for Peter’s arrogant self-assertion, nor mine for that matter. “Get behind me, Satan,” he says. Those are the same words Jesus spoke during his temptations in the wilderness. Jesus hears Peter’s rebuke as a temptation to be less than who he is and as a distraction from what he is really about. Isn’t that true for us too? Disillusionment tempts us to be less than who we truly are, to be arrogant and self-assertive, to lose sight of what we’re really about.

We often put our story before God’s, give more credence to what we see than what God sees, and believe our story to be more real than God’s story. Isn’t that what Peter’s done? Isn’t that what’s going on in the conflicts we have with others, in the times we assert ourselves and ignore others, in our words and actions of violence? In our disillusionment we can quickly and easily betray ourselves, each other, and God.

Yet, despite what the prophets of doom say, the world is not coming to an end, falling apart, or going to hell in a hand-basket. It didn't for Peter and it's not for us. The truth is we don't understand what's happening and we feel scared, angry, confused, like we're losing control. The old story of power and self-assertion no longer fits. It never did but we heard that story and told it to ourselves enough times that we believed and invested in it. Saints, we need to embrace a different story. Jesus gives us a new story. He is the new story.

His is a story of self-denial. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." It's not just a story that Jesus tells. It's the story he lives and if any want to become his followers it must become their story.

What does this mean for us then?

Self-denial is about separating ourselves from the things we often use to define ourselves; political persuasion, national identity, economic, employment, and social status, family background, even religion. It's about redefining ourselves, our priorities, and our beliefs to be more in line with those of Jesus. Self-denial is the key to loving our neighbour, our enemy, God, and even ourselves. Self-denial is what makes space for other people and recognises their lives as being equally as important and sacred as ours. It means re-examining our beliefs and attitudes about who we are, who others are, and who God is. Self-denial means not taking ourselves more seriously than we take God. Finally, and paradoxically, self-denial frees us to be alive.

Dear friends, maybe self-denial is the medicine we need to cure our disillusionment. God bless you all in the name of Jesus. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.