

Title: A Gospel Reality Check

Subtitle: By our endurance, we save our souls and gain victory over sin.

Today's Gospel gives us a reality check about any mistaken notions that having a relationship with God will make life easier or that following Jesus will solve all our problems. Neither does Jesus sugarcoat the dangers and adversities his disciples will face as they engage the world with his mission and message. In it, we hear that those who follow Christ will experience opposition, division, and trouble even in their home environment. These depictions of adversity may feel like a splash of cold water in your face, but our Lord's intent is to wake us up and make us aware of spiritual realities to which many are asleep.

I know some of you are thinking, "Why does Stephen bring up such unpleasant thoughts? I thought the church was a place to find comfort, not distress." And my answer to that objection is that the Gospel prepares us to face life as it is and not as we wish it would be. As a priest, I am here to equip the saints for the work of ministry. But if you think that serving the Lord will be all sweetness and light, it won't be long before you are disillusioned and deeply disappointed.

We also must be careful about holding Christian ideals without a realism of what we are up against. Ever since the fall, a Pandora's box of evil was opened, affecting everything. Consequently, every generation has faced challenges and spiritual battles of every shape and size. The Apostle Paul describes being "*harassed at every turn--conflicts on the outside, fears within.*"¹ In today's Gospel, when Jesus said, "***One's foes will be members of his own household,***"² he

¹ 2 Corinthians 7:5

² Matthew 10:36

wasn't kidding. In just one generation after the fall, we read that Cain slew his brother Abel. Abraham also had family troubles between his wife and her maid Hagar. Jacob's sons envied Joseph and sold him into slavery. Sin has been an ever-present reality that has worked untold heartache in every generation.

This past week we remembered Juneteenth, a holiday commemorating the notification of enslaved people in Texas (two years after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect) of their status as freed people. Remembering such hard truths from our national history hopefully enables us to learn from our past with a resolve to live differently in the future.

I, too, have had painful memories, some of which are behaviors that I have promised never to repeat. As dark as they may be, such memories have spurred me to be a better person. It seems like any message of repentance brings a certain level of personal suffering, much like Jeremiah's message in our Old Testament lesson, where God's word to him was like fire shut up in his bones that, when proclaimed, bought "insult and reproach."³

Similarly, Jesus warns, "***Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword.***"⁴ Many Jews in Jesus' day thought the coming of Messiah would bring them political peace and material prosperity, but that was not the case. His mission and message ran so much against the status quo that it resulted in strife and division. It happened throughout Jesus' ministry, and it will happen again to some extent if we faithfully follow him.

American President Theodore Roosevelt reportedly observed there has never yet been a man who led a life of ease whose name is worth remembering. The high calling of

³ Jeremiah 20:8

⁴ Matthew 10:34

discipleship is perhaps most forcibly stated in our Gospel today, where Jesus says, ***“He that taketh not his cross and followeth after me is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.”***⁵ Such a statement is hard to grasp fully. Making any sense of it requires careful theological reflection and discernment.

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul lends some spiritual light on this. In the portion of it that was read today, Paul exhorts the believers at Rome to take hold of a gospel that is the power of God for a salvation that offers us a lot more than just the forgiveness of sins. And what he shares with us is so mindblowing that some theologians, like Karl Barth, have named it “Paul’s bombshell.” This bombshell is dropped in the playground of our lives so that we can be transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ, which is no easy task. Even the Apostle admits, ***“When I want to do good, evil lies close at hand.”***⁶ As he deals with the reality of sin that resides within himself, he acknowledges that it is an all-out battle that only Christ living within him can win. Fortunately, this victory is ours as we are united with Christ’s death and resurrection in baptism. ***“For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be enslaved to sin.”***⁷ This astounding statement is our Emancipation Proclamation, and it is upon this foundation a godly moral character is built.

In 1654 Thomas Brooks wrote, ***“Holiness is the very marrow and quintessence of Christianity. Holiness is God’s character stamped and printed upon the soul; it is Christ formed in the heart; it is our light, our life, our beauty, our glory, our joy, our crown, our all.”*** The grace that Brooks describes

⁵ Matthew 10: 38-39

⁶ Romans 7:21

⁷ Romans 6:6

happens when we make a personal connection to our Lord's death on the cross on our behalf. It is a spiritual mystery in which we "*share in Christ's suffering, becoming like him in his death.*"⁸ The suffering is real. The crucifixion was a slow death; the body, after it was nailed to a cross, gave many convulsive throes and desperate struggles. The same is true in our experience as we surrender and renounce the sins that draw us away from the love of God. Dying to sin with Christ is never easy. No one wants to die. No one wants to give up the idols they hold dear.

When Jesus spoke about going to the cross, Peter took "*Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord!'*"⁹ There is always an aversion to the cross. But by his grace, we can endure and overcome. Our opening Collect (prayer) affirms that God "*never fails to help and govern those whom he has set upon the sure foundation of his unfailing love.*"¹⁰

So even when the going gets tough, and the world, the flesh, and the devil oppose our every step, we can be assured that Jesus is there, identifying with our weakness and interceding for us. Through the work of His Spirit, we can and will endure to the saving of our souls as we are drawn into something bigger and greater than ourselves. And we can stand firm, being "*confident of this, that the one who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*"¹¹

⁸ Philippians 3:10

⁹ Matthew 16:

¹⁰ BCP, Collect for Proper 7, p. 230

¹¹ Philippians 1:6