Reverend Jim's Sermon – September 3, 2023

"From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Someone once said that the role of a Prophet, (and Jesus was by his own reckoning the last and greatest of the Hebrew prophets) that the role of a prophet is to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. The Gospels are Good News, but not always easy news.

The exchange between Peter and Jesus, quoted above, is certainly one of the most disturbing moments in Mathew's Gospel.

Peter, who has already been identified as the leader of the disciples, and who has also already been chided for his lack of faith and lack of understanding, is told by Jesus that he is a stumbling block, and that his inability to accept the coming death of Jesus is a temptation of hellish proportions. "Get behind me Satan", Jesus says.

I find this short conversation one of the most difficult in the whole of the New Testament, and I don't think I am alone. Someone on Thursday said he finds this story so disturbing that he likes to think it may be a mistranslation.

While the force of Jesus' rebuke of Peter may seem over the top, it is not out of character for Jesus to speak with some harshness, not just to the religious powers of the day, but to his own followers. And it is not unusual for spiritual teachers, wisdom teachers, to use such a tone with their students.

A few years ago, I was at a retreat with a teacher who I had been following for some years. This was the 5th or 6th time I had attended one of this teacher's retreats. She would often give little lectures and it was common for people to ask questions. I rarely did, but on this occasion, I asked a question not challenging the teacher but requesting clarification (or so I thought). Her response was something like this: "Thanks for this question. It's a great question, because it shows how utterly and thoroughly some people can misunderstand the basics of what I am trying to say." To make matters worse, this workshop was recorded and made into a CD, that is still making the rounds.

I felt so bad that I went to the teacher and told her how her response had landed with me, how hurt I felt. Her response was basically that, though she regretted that I was hurt, it was my problem to deal with. I have never fully resolved this experience, or my relationship with this teacher, for myself.

I was at another talk more recently, by a very well renowned spiritual and theological teacher, at the Cowichan Theatre. A young man got up to ask a question, which he introduced with a bit of background, and before he got the question out, the teacher stopped him and said, "Look, people have come to hear me. They haven't come to hear you."

I have more examples, and you likely have some of your own, but you get my point.

In many traditions, those of the rabbinic scholars, the students of Tibetan Buddhism, and among some Christian teachers, the methodology can be confrontational and at times, quite harsh. In so many of these cases, (certainly we would think in the case of Jesus) this harshness is not meant to wound or hurt the student, but to wake them up, or to shake the student from his or her sense of pride or certainty; to open them to hear the wisdom that is being offered. Or, perhaps, to indicate, just how important a particular issue is. In

the case of Peter and Jesus, we can assume that Jesus was concerned that Peter understood very clearly that it was the cross that was awaiting him in Jerusalem, and not a celebration. He needed Peter on his side, not trying to talk him out of the sacrifice that he must make.

These encounters with teachers who chastise their students with such rigor are designed to teach humility, but not humility that is about demeaning ourselves, or putting ourselves down, but rather it is the humility that we see in the encounter between Moses and Yahweh of the burning bush.

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Moses says. To which God replies: "I will be with you."

God cannot lead us if we have already decided where we are going and how we are going to get there. God cannot teach us what we insist that we already know. Christian humility is not about feeling bad about ourselves, it is about being open to the Holy Spirit, to *God's* wisdom.

What is most amazing about today's Gospel is that there is no indication that Peter responds with anything but his characteristic loyalty to his master. He stays with Jesus and follows him to Jerusalem. I know I have not reacted so well in similar situations.

So, I am the last to judge others, but I think of all the empty pews in all the Anglican churches that were once filled by people who, for one reason or another, because of one off handed remark or one misunderstanding, left the church and all that it had meant to them. Sometimes these are people who were faithful church members for decades.

As we well know, sometimes these folks have been hurt in truly unacceptable ways, but I do wonder if we as a culture are less resilient, less flexible, less modest than we have been in the past. I have had many conversations with colleagues over the years about

how they have felt the need to be more and more careful about what they say to students or to other teachers. I imagine you know what I am talking about.

The message in today's readings is that our feelings, our pride are not the end all and be all. They are tools to learn and grow, and sometimes they may get battered a bit. Anyone relate to this?

The goal is not to avoid getting hurt the goal is to learn how to be better vessels of God's light and love, to learn how better to allow that love to heal us at the same time that it shines through us to others, to know with certainty that we belong to God, and are not alone in the universe, that we cannot live the lives we want to live, and to which God calls us, without God's grace.

The other part of this humility that I am speaking of is the freedom that comes from knowing that we are not God, and that we are not responsible for saving the world. Someone else has that job. And while he may appreciate our help, he does not need it. We work in our little ways to bring about the kingdom of God, not because Jesus is inadequate to do so on his own; we do it because we need to, for ourselves, if our goal is to be transformed into a vehicle of divine light and love. Jesus does not burden us with the need to be God, in fact the very opposite is true. Jesus calls us to empty ourselves of ego and illusions of grandeur, of any Messianic complex we might have, so that God can fill us., and use us.

But this too can sometimes be difficult.

This week I had a conversation with a friend, whose daughter, Jamie, used to be one of my students. The daughter is now 22, and her job is rappelling out of helicopters into the midst of the wildfires such as we have seen across Canada this summer, often to rescue trapped or injured firefighters.

In July the helicopter crew she was with was directed to pick up an injured firefighter, 19-year-old Devyn Gale, from a wildfire site near Revelstoke. When they got her into the helicopter, Jamie was told that there was a woman on the ground there with level three first aid, while Jamie only had level one. Her crew boss told her that the better trained medic would go with the helicopter and Jamie was to stay back. Devyn died before reaching the hospital despite heroic efforts by the the woman with the level three first aid, who had accompanied her.

Jamie told her mother that the woman who had gone in her own place was so traumatized by the experience that she had not been able to work since. Her mother told me, "Jamie is always saying that she isn't doing enough. That she must find a way to save all these people being threatened by the fires. And now she has survivor's remorse. She feels guilty, that she didn't train more so she could have been the one on the helicopter with Devyn Gale. She is filled with guilt all the time for not doing enough."

No one would judge Jamie for her dedication and her conviction, but at the same time, it is difficult to see a young person feel so burdened by a sense of inadequacy, of never doing enough. This is the real purpose of humility, to help us to be in right relationship with God and right relationship with the world. To know that as we strive to reach out to those in need, to be the best person we can be, we are not the Saviour of the world; and to believe or act like we are only gets in the way of our relationship with the one who is.

We gather this morning as his body, and we know that he does and will continue to use us when we open ourselves to him and to one another, and we share in the bread and wine as a sign, but also as the way to become his body more fully.

And finally let us listen once again to the words of the Apostle Paul who says it all so well:

"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."