

Sermon for September 3, 2023
Pentecost XIV
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Just a few short weeks ago, I was on the mountaintop. I felt in tune with God's will and knew without a doubt that the Spirit was working through me in ways that went beyond my understanding. I watched humbly as I got out of God's way and allowed the Holy Spirit to move in and through me to bless the lives of multiple people. In a handful of trying moments, I laid down my own ideas of what should be and what should happen and chose obedience. As a result, I witnessed a number of small miracles. Most humbling of all, I was graced with a deep healing myself, something I had been praying for for a long time. I had been blessed beyond measure.

Within two days of that moment of healing and grace, I fell and fell hard. For the better part of a week, I was overcome by my earthly desires, my mind and heart clouded by the things of this world. Thankfully, I didn't act on those desires. However, Jesus tells us that holding anger or lust in our hearts makes us guilty of murder or adultery respectively. So, I suppose I am guilty as charged. I had been given so much by God's grace and I came so close to throwing it all away. I nearly proverbially spat in Jesus' face and caused pain to the very people I had shown agape love to and love from mere days before. I had gone from one extreme to the other, from obedience to the Spirit to falling prey to the desires of this world.

When I considered the depths I fell to that week, I doubted whether I would be able to in good conscience stand before you today. It was at that moment that the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart. "You're human, Leah. And in that story is one powerful sermon."

Perhaps Peter and I have something in common. Immediately preceding today's Gospel reading, Jesus commends Simon Peter for hearing God's voice in his heart and recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus then gives Simon the name "Peter," meaning rock, and tells Peter that it is on him that he will build his church.

Shortly thereafter, as we see in the Gospel this morning, Jesus explains to his apostles about his upcoming death. Peter's response is so relatable, so human. If events transpired as Jesus had explained, Peter would not only be short a rabbi, mentor, and friend, but his Rome conquering Messiah. And so, Peter proclaims, "Never, Lord, This should never happen to you!". And then, it happens. A mere 5 verses after being called "the rock", Jesus calls Peter "Satan". "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Whew, I can relate!

All of us have two sides, the same two sides that we have been hearing about in our readings from the book of Romans over the past several weeks: the flesh and the spirit. The voice of the flesh, or ego, speaks first and loudest, usually leading to fear and anxiety. The voice of the Spirit is much quieter and leads us to peace, truth and joy. What voice we are listening to varies moment by moment.

When we are listening to the flesh, we are concerned with the things of man. When we surrender our earthly desires and tune into the voice of God, we are losing our earthly life to find our heavenly one. It's a choice we are asked to make again and again. Truth or illusion? Love or fear? Our emotions are a wonderful guidance system to help us to discern which voice we are

heeding. Even when things seem not to be going our way, when we might feel like we are being asked to sacrifice in the name of obedience to God, if we heed the voice of the Spirit, we will feel at peace. We will be resting in the promise of Romans 8:28, that all things work out for the good of those who love the Lord.

Looking at things from Peter's perspective, it is not hard to see how fear took over and he believed things were going to hell in a handbasket in a hurry. What Jesus willed in that moment for himself and for Peter was the furthest thing from what he wanted. I wonder, though, what Peter thought towards the end of his life as he looked back on that moment. What came from Jesus' surrendering his human life changed Peter, and all of us, for eternity. When Peter thought he was being asked to make a great sacrifice, God was working a miracle beyond his wildest dreams. Perhaps we too ought to step back when we sense we are being asked to sacrifice our wants and desires and simply open our hands and our hearts and just receive all that God would give us.

There is another aspect of Peter's humanity in today's Gospel reading that is worth highlighting. Peter was loyal to Jesus to a fault, to the point of taking the role of tempter in Jesus' inner circle. Yet, Peter's loyalty to Jesus was also his strength, the strength that Jesus would build the church on. Jesus knew Peter's heart, his imperfect understanding and imperfect love, and asked him to serve him anyway. And in a week after the one I just recovered from, when I am so acutely aware of my own weakness, I am so humbled and grateful that Jesus knows our hearts and will take us as we are.

And so, faced with the ever-present uncertainties of life, our fears and anxieties and draws of worldly temptation, how do we "get behind Jesus" and heed the Spirit's voice? Psalm 105:4 asks us to "Search for the Lord and his strength; continually seek his face." Starting and ending the day in prayer and quiet listening to the spirit's voice is essential. And for those of you looking for specific advice, our reading from Romans today lays it all out pretty clearly. It's probably worth taking that one home and working through it line by line, letting it soak into your heart.

My favorite piece of practical advice, however, comes from our Exodus reading this morning. In this exchange of Moses with God, there are two lines that stick out to me. The first is Moses' answer when God calls to him from the burning bush: "Here I am". The second is Moses' response when God informs him that Moses will be the one to bring the people out of Egypt: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?". God's answer: "I will be with you" says it all.

Each and every moment, we are called to lay ourselves, our flesh, our Earthly selves on the altar. We are called to say, "Here I am." And when the call of God seems too big for us to handle, our crosses too big for us to carry, we must remember that it isn't us doing it after all. It is God through us.

This is the heart of our faith. Our daily turning from the lies, the fears, the insecurities to the truth of who we are in Christ. My brothers and sisters, what will it take for us to lay down our lives for God? What will it take for us to turn from our insecurities, our guilt, our shame, and to allow ourselves to be living vessels of the Spirit, the hands and feet of Christ in the world? To trust that God can hold it all and work all things for our good?

If you think you're not worthy or can't do it, you are absolutely right. None of us are. It is only through the power of the Spirit within us that we are worthy. It is this power within us that makes us capable of moving mountains.

I am living, breathing proof that the Spirit can and will move through anyone. I can relate to Paul's statement of his own unworthiness to serve Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15. Paraphrased and modernized, Paul tells us: "I'm a hot mess!" Yes, Paul, I hear you there! God is determined to use us just as we are. All it takes is a whole-hearted surrender of our will to God's. Our human selves do nothing. It is when we step aside, when we "get behind" Jesus and surrendered our will to His, that the miracles happen. We need the healing that only God can give. And our brothers and sisters need us to be the vessels of the Spirit to bring the love of God to them.

When next God calls your name, I pray that you will answer "Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will." And then, may you step back and humbly watch the miracles the Spirit works through you.