

MAKING THE MOST, EVEN THE BEST OF THE WORST!



EXODUS 1:8-2:10
PSALM 124
ROMANS 12:1-8
MATTHEW 16:13-20

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time
Proper 16
Year A; August 27, 2017



MAKING THE MOST, EVEN THE BEST OF THE WORST!

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold!)

This morning I want to take us behind a text! And so, I want to begin this sermon by playing a game of “let’s pretend” to provide some context for today’s Witness from the Gospels in Matthew. Let your minds wander and wonder, allowing your imaginations run wild! Picture the following fictional scenario. The year is circa 70CE in and around the city of Jerusalem. Now unlike your average juicy romance novel, this is a fictional account based on fact, the historical reality surrounding the way the Christian Church evolved back in the day, in and around the second fall of Jerusalem, including the destruction of the Temple. Think of the highly controversial Dan Brown novel, *The DaVinci Code*, as a template for what I am trying to accomplish. Though following a fictional plotline, the novel is based on verifiable historical events and readily available written materials, the non-canonical books that failed to make it into the Bible, the familiar Canon of scripture we now read with regularity in our devotional and liturgical practices. These volumes are generally categorized as the “lost” Gospels, but lost they are not. Hey, I even have copies of them on my bookshelves! It’s not that I believe in them; why, I’ve seen them!

Imagine the scenario of a typical Jewish family, faithful to the core. They attend their local synagogue regularly for worship, to give their offerings, continuing to carry out rituals of purity and protocol, the sacrificial system now a dinosaur, a blip on the radar of time's rearview mirrors. Yet, in many ways they still functioned much like their ancestors in the faith had done for centuries. They were living under Roman occupation, but that was really nothing new throughout their adventure filled history, or so it seemed. Their ancestors had frequently lived under somebody's thumb, dominated and oppressed by an always assumed inferior adversary. From Egypt, to Syria, to Babylon, to Rome there was nothing new under the sun in their oft indentured lives. Sometimes being the chosen few was a tough row to hoe! As long as the Jews obeyed Roman rule, acquiesced to their authority, following societal laws while keeping to themselves, and, most importantly paying their exorbitant taxes to Caesar, with nary a hint of subversive or rebellious behavior, never, ever even appearing to consider an insurrection or to instigate violence in any form, they could peacefully coexist with their occupiers. However, even the slightest inclination toward rocking the boat in the manner accused of Jesus or other peasant reformers, potential rabble rousers who were seen as a direct threat to the empire, appearing to even contemplate even the slightest modicum of possibility leading toward a revolt or revolution, would trigger swift reactivity, be met with deadly force.

But, things were a bit different in the life of the synagogues these days, a little off kilter, a very real tension caused by some serious anxiety in the system. It was the proverbial powder keg just waiting to blow! It seems there was a restlessness revealing itself in a movement afoot among many orthodox Jews who seemed swayed, convinced that Jesus was the liberator of the faith for whom they had long hoped. It is clear that they were enamored, infatuated with what was being unofficially described as the Jesus movement, led by a group known as “the followers of the way,” an emerging sectarian branch or offshoot within the faith tradition of their birth. Think of it kind of as being like the numerous monastic orders that have emerged through the years in Roman Catholic life, each having their own specialized agenda. Jesus had been dead for more than five decades now, but his teachings were ironically outliving this deceased Rabbi and were strangely, perhaps surprisingly gaining ground, getting traction among many who evidently must have been looking for something new and different, something exciting and captivating, even intoxicating! But, this was anything but the latest fad! This movement had already proved to have staying power! Many were saying that Jesus’ teachings were really nothing new in Judaism, but were an honest attempt to recapture the pure essence of a faith that many believed had stagnated and long gone astray, leaving far behind the moorings of its first love. Many of these same

folks believed Jesus to be the quintessential Jew, a supreme example of what it meant to be Jewish, that is, a lover of all persons, a Rabbi who was inclusive rather than exclusive in orientation. Jesus had proven that he was anything but an isolationist. He was a friend and mentor, a colleague and fellow traveler, one with whom you could have an honest, an authentic, genuine conversation. He spoke to those he encountered and engaged as if they are the only person present. It was a natural gift! To quote the late Michael Jackson, and I have always wanted to quote Michael Jackson in a sermon, he was “a lover, not a fighter!” His many adversaries, many of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes and the like, far more concerned with dividing and conquering, more concerned with ritual cleanliness or purity, more concerned with keeping the rules and regulations as the select few, crossing Ts and dotting Is as the chosen of God. Unlike them, Jesus was all about building relational communities which he described in terms of the Great Banquet Feast reflecting the realm of God, including the down and out, disenfranchised and marginalized women and Gentiles and the like, every person deemed unclean and thus refused admittance, denied participation in the inner circles of the orthodox Judaism of the day. It must be remembered at this point that Jesus was born Jewish and died Jewish, faithful to the religious tradition of his birth until the very bitter end. He lived all of his life as a faithful Jew. He never converted to Christianity, nor

did he predict or plan for it! Somehow, we always seem to conveniently manage to forget that simple fact in history!

The problem within the synagogues had reached a fever pitch, with sides drawn, tensions high, emotions creating backlash and a boatload of hostility and negative reactivity. It quickly devolved into a family systems nightmare of the highest, most untenable order. Leadership feared a meltdown within the faith community and feared even more the unwanted attention of Rome. Something had to happen and something had to happen quickly. The eventual and inevitable solution should not have come as a surprise to anyone then or anyone of us now, somebody, some group had to go before Rome's radar detected a problem. Too late for that, for just like in 586BCE, in 70CE Jerusalem was once again destroyed along with the Temple and all bets were off, the effect reaching into every local synagogue. Those who were branded or declared themselves "followers of the way" were disfellowshipped, booted from the train, summarily, expediently dispatched from the synagogues, the resulting residual a permanent schism making shockwaves of tsunami proportions throughout an already precariously fragile Judaism. No pomp and circumstance, no need to stand on ceremony! As we would say, they were left blowing in the wind, hanging out to dry, ridden hard and put up wet, now facing enemies from both within—Judaism—and outside—Rome! In the Book of Acts, we now

find the suddenly disconnected, cutoff followers of Jesus huddled in fear in homes because they now had become the convenient target of Rome, now blamed for the failures of Empire, the instability and hints of insurrection that had created this meltdown of ginormous proportions, this colossal community crisis. Jesus' band was considered a blight, a pariah in the eyes of family and friends and, most notably in the eyes of Rome, the great oppressor, an unwieldy and unyielding foe. Unfortunately for Jesus' followers, it is apparent that they had garnered Rome's undivided attention having been thrown to these ravenous wolves. They were now forced, out of necessity of circumstance, scenarios and situations far beyond their limited control, to worship in homes, huddled in fear, lambs on the run, fugitives all. They foolishly, naively sold all that they had, believing that Jesus was going to come back soon and rescue them, delivering them from the terror and torture of a Roman juggernaut that now blamed them for creating this societal mess. That horrific state of affairs even included their becoming tasty dinner snacks for lions and other wild life, among other hideously cruel executions. Jesus never returned to retrieve them! Many of them died a gory and gruesome death, persecuted beyond belief, and yet while having already grown exponentially, their numbers seemed to prosper even more. Ironically, it seemed that the more they were persecuted and slaughtered for their stubborn allegiance the more alluring was their faith, the more resilient their resolve. Through the efforts of

the Apostles, including one particularly zealous proselyte, a former Pharisee named Paul, they were well on their way, very much on solid footing.

Fast forward to the year 312CE, the Roman Emperor Constantine is converted to Christianity, the word “Christian” having been coined at Antioch during all this upheaval, and the rest, as we say, is history, Christendom becoming a juggernaut and now unfortunately taking its rightful place, a lofty status befitting its newly minted seat of privilege and prestige as a massive religious, societal institution of powerful proportions. The Empire and the Church were not only strange bedfellows, but sadly became the perfect match, each driven by violence to maintain order and control in what was a heavily masculine machine, a powerful patriarchy with women taking a back seat if allowed a seat at all. Suddenly, almost as if overnight, the cheese of the Church moved and it quickly in no way resembled the peaceful way of Jesus back in the day! Not only was a new religion born, unlike anything Jesus would have ever anticipated or imagined, much less recognized, or certainly much less would have desired, but it would ironically, irony of all ironies, now be reduced to, devolving into the lackey of the government as the state Church of the Roman Empire! In many ways, the Church now was the very antithesis to everything upon which Jesus stood and died. No one could have ever anticipated or predicted that; no one could have

ever imagined that; no one could have ever seen that coming—not in their wildest dreams! And, whatever became of our imaginary family, you might ask? Well, as was typical with many Jewish families then who were confronted with the radical message of Jesus, some of them converted while others were abhorred by even the prospects of such a notion, offended at the very idea. Scoffing at this perceived perversion, the naysayers rejected outright this Rabbi's teachings as the ultimate heresy, families permanently scarred, separated forever, never to find common ground in their lifetimes. That is why Matthew in the tenth chapter tells his reader, “Don't think that I've come to bring peace to the earth. I haven't come to bring peace but a sword. I've come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. People's enemies are members of their own households.” Once again, once we understand the context of any text, any scripture verse whatsoever, we can interpret it accurately and understand the reason that it was written and was included in the narrative. As I like to remind my Bible study students, the Bible will always tell you what you need to know if you are willing to let it do so. There is always more to a text than meets the eye because the meanings often are found when we are willing and able to read between the lines. It is always about nuance.

It is human nature to put a positive spin on our most troubling realities, to try and make the proverbial lemonade out of a bucket of lemons. We often joke about putting a ribbon on a pig! That is how we humans survive and even thrive during conflict and devastation. Once the “followers of the way” were driven out of the synagogues, faced with the ultimate humiliation, the shame and guilt that come with familial, communal, and societal rejection, they needed a way to find hope and healing, a salve to restore their collective wounds, their tremendously damaged egos. Their solution was found in reinterpreting the Jesus event and their experience, by retelling their story, by claiming that Jesus real intent had always been to found a Church made up of Christians, rather than merely a lame attempt at trying to put a band aid on what was interpreted as a gaping wound. They abandoned their initial narrative that Jesus was a reformer who attempted and failed to reform the faith tradition of his and their birth, restoring and reforming the perceived or presumed defective or flawed principles and practices of ancient Judaism. Into the Gospel narratives they forced their present crises, recalibrating and retrofitting their abject rejection, the hostile conflict to fit neatly and nicely, even seamlessly into the fabric of history during the time that Jesus lived, as he walked and talked, proclaiming his message, revealing his mission and ministry among his people. This gave the “followers of the way” a way, a way out and a way into a new reality.

While on a rather perverse and pathetic level, one way of thinking about this human dynamic of the need to overcome guilt and shame, and very relevant for our societal situation today, is to think of the aftermath of the Civil War and the way the South reinterpreted its regrettable and embarrassing history. The issue of slavery was put on a shelf while states' rights became the rallying cry defending an indefensible, untenable position. That is why many arrogantly refer to the War Between the States as "The War of Northern Aggression." An excellent example of mythologizing and romanticizing the horrific events is Margaret Mitchell's epic novel, *Gone with the Wind*. That is why during the Jim Crowe nonsense, during the early 1900s, hundreds of statues dedicated to commemorating and honoring the exploits of Confederate Generals and other assorted Southern heroes dot the landscape of the South. In many ways, in all honesty, and for a very noble cause, that is the way the Gospel writers wove their contemporary situation, the current events of their day into the Jesus story, writing as if this really was chronological history happening in real time.

Into this storyline we find today's Gospel narrative and so very many others just like it. It is the consensus of most biblical scholars that many of the Gospel narratives, including many sayings attributed to Jesus, actually have their origin at the time of their writing, that is, written anywhere from about 65CE, the writing of the earliest Gospel Mark, until about 100CE, the writing of the last Gospel, John. One of

my goals is to always bring the conclusions and consensus of modern biblical scholarship, the gleanings of the latest research into my preaching, even knowing the risks contained therein when the contemporary interpretation goes against the grain of traditional conventional wisdom. Some really get into that, while a few others not so much! There but by the grace of God go I! Sidebar: I have discovered, much to my dismay, that our Jewish brothers and sisters know our early history, from the time of Jesus' death until the great schism, the permanent split between Jews and the followers of Jesus, far better than we because "we" were still very much Jewish and thus this part of our story is predominantly and significantly part and parcel of their history. I have come to that sad reality in numerous conversations with Rabbi Carla from whom I have learned much, filling in the gaps about what might very well be described as a mysterious time frame in our development. We have much to discover! But, I digress; I often do! **I give you all this background because it is impossible to honestly engage these texts and gain any insight about them unless we understand their context, and that specifically includes a basic knowledge of the history, the real-time period in which they were written, including their original, their intended audience. In no way does any of this cheapen or invalidate any of the overall message contained within and conveyed by the Gospels. Neither does it lessen their import. What it does mean is that we must, perhaps reluctantly or begrudgingly or even painfully acknowledge that many of the quotes attributed to Jesus,**

he never actually uttered, but were placed on his lips, once again, recalibrated and retrofitted at the time these narratives were written to fit a specific agenda. They subtly reveal the troubling realities, constant companions that were agonizingly confronting the emerging Church. Considering that understanding, what can today's pinnacle, pivotal Gospel conversation between Jesus and Peter offer to us in our own real-time scenario?

Well, if I can radically pivot our conversation, 2000 years plus later, this enterprise called Christianity is more than a major player on the religious landscape of the world. The resiliency and longevity of this massive institution is a clear and certain testimony, a witness to what we know to be true, that there was something and is something so incredible, so transformational about Jesus and his message, his mission and ministry. It is so transparent, so crystal clear that it transcends time, continuing even now in our midst to still relevantly speak a vibrant and vital word, even and perhaps especially in light of the postmodern realities of this 21st century in which all of us live and move and have our being. Back in the day, every superlative adjective imaginable that had been created to gloriously describe the Caesar was quickly borrowed or stolen, adopted, and, for one last time, recalibrated and retrofitted onto Jesus, a witness by his followers prophetically preached to the effect that Jesus was the real deal and not the God-imposter Caesar. And, you wonder why so

many early Christians were terrorized and tortured, brutally persecuted because of their faith. Fed to wild beasts, burned at the stake, ripped apart by the crudest and cruelest of instruments, implements of terror and torture, brutal, demonic creations designed to inflict the harshest imaginable pain and agony, these early followers would not be deterred in the least, would never waver or waffle, unequivocally remaining steadfast in the resolve of their faith and their personal and public commitment to Jesus' teachings, all the while swearing their total, their very soul, their ultimate allegiance to the one they regarded as their Savior and Lord, their Master and Rabbi. And make no mistake that was no small thing in the Roman world, do not underestimate their conviction as they gave their unquestioned, unwavering until death fidelity to this unique, one of a kind, never realized before or since, emissary of God. In Jesus, they had experienced something so remarkable, so radically mind, body, heart, and soul altering, that this humble son of Nazareth was celebrated as God in the flesh, as Immanuel incarnate, the very presence of the Divine. Therein is the legacy of our faith, the belief that in Jesus we have found someone who can save us from all that diminishes, all that hinders our humanity, one sent from God who can inspire us to greatness through generous goodness and grace, to love in a way that defies logic, that is "wasteful" (See: John Shelby Spong who coined this phrase) in every way, "extravagantly welcoming," expansively

hospitable, and radically inclusive. No wonder that it appeared to these later first and early second-generation followers, that they sincerely would come to believe and espouse that Jesus had indeed come bringing a new religious expression, a new religion crafted like none other before or after it. No one had ever seen anything like this before. No one has seen anything like it since, or ever will again! That is how radical the Jesus experience was in their oft miserable lives. They were livin' large and livin' the dream!

And so today we read that astounding conversation between Jesus and Peter, a defining moment among many defining moments in which we see a people coming to grips with their new reality and this soon not to be sectarian offshoot within Judaism. They were about to be somewhat accidentally, strangely liberated, about to break free in every way imaginable, becoming for good or ill their own unique expression of faithfulness, never to be reunited. Jesus could have never envisioned what was transpiring among his followers and where this movement was headed. In crucifying their leader, not only was Jesus' raised in their midst, risen to new life, but his followers were galvanized, resurrected in a faith that transcended every negative thing the universe could throw their way. They would not be deterred despite the longest, most impossible odds. Literally, everything was stacked against them, and yet, we are here, the proof of the pudding that there was and is a very real presence and power

in this Christ business! They should have been a less than one generational aberrational mutation! Once they were kicked out of the synagogues and exposed to the whims of ravaging hordes of bloodthirsty Roman adversaries, nobody would have given them a prayer's chance in hell except for the one who could withstand the very gates of hell. For all intents and purposes, they should have had a very short shelf life, they should have been annihilated, exterminated in but a few whirlwind days of their most vulnerable exposure to Rome's white-hot heat, and yet, they somehow grew, exponentially increased in number, amazingly multiplying against all rational comprehension. Last week we read of Joseph's reunion with his brothers, his flesh and blood kin who sold him into slavery, eventually landing him in Egypt. Full of guilt and shame, his brothers now fall all over themselves apologizing. But, Joseph takes the high road and tells them that everything that has transpired is of God, and that what they meant for evil, God meant for good. In many ways that is exactly what happened to Jesus' followers at a very painful, pivotal, pinnacle, poignant moment in time. It was a necessary evil, as we are prone to say, an inevitable result of a system that could no longer maintain or sustain, much less nurture two rapidly diverging, and now unfortunately so at the time, apparently clearly distinct expressions of faith. What seemed a care-less, a wicked and vile reaction, an evil of an enormous magnitude, came full circle and we would all argue, all declare with gusto that we are all the better,

blessed with abundance heirs celebrating that great legacy even as we converge in these sacred moments together gathered as beloved faith Christian community. We are but a small gathering of the larger Church, our faith the rock on which it was once built. By the sweat of the brow, on the backs of the abused, the Church continues to stand in spite of continued conflict, schism and upheaval, and every human element that threatens its very survival. It remains faithful despite the faults, flaws, and failures that have accompanied its journey through history. After all, it is still a very human institution! By all accounts the movement should have died right along with Jesus. After all, that was Rome's ultimate goal for any entity seen as a threat to its power and prestige. We are here by the gifts and toils of many, entrusted in every way to continue the advocacy begun in Jesus, cemented by his followers, reformed by generations, and now articulated and exemplified, continued to be reformed by the likes of all of us, you and I included.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, sustains, and loves the Church and all of us in it. Amen and amen.

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