



The Cost of Justice

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ September 13, 2009

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He 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.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

"Woody Allen, in his movie "Annie Hall," tells the story of the man who goes to a psychiatrist, complaining that his brother-in-law, who lives with him, thinks he is a chicken. "Describe his symptoms," the doctor says. "Maybe I can help." "Well," replies the man, "he cackles a lot, he pecks at the rug and the furniture, and he makes nests in the corner." The doctor thinks for a moment, then says, "It sounds like a simple neurosis to me. Bring your brother-in-law in and I think I can cure him *completely*." "Oh no, Doc," says the man, "we wouldn't want that! We need the eggs!"

I find it simply extraordinary to observe the endless occasions when we simultaneously desire change and then resist the very change we desire, when we want healing or new opportunity and then thwart our own best intentions and desires. Sometimes there is a tangible benefit to keeping things as they are; we need the eggs. Often, however, it's a question of inertia or unwillingness to upset the equilibrium. Some sharp, short-term discomfort is needed to break free from the dull, chronic pain. Our capacity to accommodate and adjust for undesirable or unhealthy behaviors as individuals and as entire societies can be simply mind-boggling.

It is as if our Lord God said to us, "I offer you this day, life and death; choose life." "Life is the obvious and right choice," we say, "but death will suffice for the moment, for a bit longer...."

While away on a spiritual retreat not long ago, my director asked me one day to pray with a passage from the prophet Ezekiel. I guess I should preface this story by saying that this was early in the week of my retreat, and I had set aside this time of prayer because I found myself in real need of some spiritual nourishment. I was thirsty and in need of a deep drink of God's presence.

In the passage from Ezekiel, God speaks to the people Israel, and laments the people's waywardness, the fact that they simply conform to the evil ways of the world around them. Recognizing that the people are unable or

unwilling to return to a right relationship by adherence to God's law, in a last ditch effort, God exclaims: "I will gather you up. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.... Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." (36:25-28)

As I prayed with these words, as I heard this gift, this promise, offered to my arid soul, I could feel the prospect of my thirst being slaked, of a weight being lifted, of those dead places within myself being ignited once more with new life; of flesh, life, and promise replacing hard stone.

And even as I began to respond, "Yes Lord, yes!" I responded more definitively "no, no!" And I knew where that "no" came from within me. It came from the place that fears the unknown; it came from the place that wants Ledlie to maintain control and not risk – not take that terrifying unknowable risk – of ego giving way to spirit; of relinquishing control to the unknown, even the unknown, all knowing, loving God of my meager faith. It came from the place inside that says, its safer to stay with what you know, dry as that may be, than to take a chance that could lead only to God knows where, life giving as that may be.

I think we are witness to a similar conversation in today's Gospel. In response to Jesus' questions, Peter has taken a leap and made a most extraordinary affirmation: that Jesus is none other than the Messiah, chosen of God, salvation of the world; the one who shall bring freedom from oppression. With such an affirmation must come an assent from Peter – from his heart if not his lips; "Yes Lord, yes! You are the one; I am with you."

But then Jesus goes on, and explains that he will soon be taken from this company of his disciples, that he will be hated, persecuted; must be put to death and rise again. Amidst the glow of Peter's newly envisioned future, he recognizes that this means change, that things will be different, costs that he had not foreseen; Jesus will not be there and Peter will have to do things, say things, go places that he knows nothing about. 'No. No. This cannot be!' Peter blurts out.

Jesus' response is very important: "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." This is a sharp, powerful rebuke: "Snap out of it Peter! Stop clinging to what you know, to your limited perspective. I, the Lord, am calling you to a higher task." It is an important response because it is one of many in which we see Jesus encountering people, meeting them where they are, acknowledging their needs and limitations, acknowledging our needs and limitations. And challenging us, provoking us to grow up, to take a step out of trust, to speak out for mercy or justice or love. Snap out of it!

Why? Partly because it is what the individual needs, what Peter needs or I need, or you perhaps. Because then and now Jesus calls forth the outrageous potential budding within each person. It is partly this, and it is mostly because God is calling us – you and me – to take courageous steps in our lives and in the world, courageous steps of mercy, justice and love – and we are unable to do so if we're focused within, clinging to our own needs. The Ezekiel passage I read from earlier is both preceded and followed by an explanation of why God offers a new heart: "It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord God; let that be known to you." (36:32) "I am about to act ... for the sake of my holy name. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations ... and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes." (36:22-23) We are to be agents of God's mercy, justice and love.

It is plenty unfortunate when we get stuck ourselves and end up in our little eddy, hurting, or at least not thriving, as individuals or as members of our family. But the broader implication to this is that our actions and inactions have a wide rippling effect.

Last Tuesday I attended a meeting with the Rev. John Midwood, director of ECS – Episcopal Community Services. As the principal outreach arms of the Diocese, ECS provides direct care to many of the neediest in our city – with foster care, after-school programs for children, GED and vocational training; a whole range. While much of their funding depends upon support from parishes such as ours and individual contributors like you, like most social service agencies, they receive a lot of city, state, and federal funding – or at least they did until the latest round of budget freezes. The programs at ECS are getting clobbered, shuttered until further notice. Especially sobering was John's observation that lot's of people seem to think that once we get over the recession, we'll get back on track and pick up where we were a year or so ago. We're not going back, said John; there's been a loss of public will to direct funds toward the poor. In the current economic squeeze, people are turning in, turning back; we feel justified in keeping what we've got, keeping it for ourselves. If there are others without, that's too bad.

In a parallel sort of way, I'm feeling anxious about the prospects of health care reform. Initially, it felt as though we had the stomach, the will, the determination, to execute a major overhaul of the system. But as the debate

drags on, and everyone chisels away at their own particular agenda, fueling pernicious fears, making sure it doesn't hurt their own particular status quo, I fear the opportunity will be lost and we'll end up with something half-done, half-baked, that won't get to the heart, the heart of the matter. With our nation's wealth and resources, our expertise and intelligence, to do anything short of providing care for the poorest and weakest of our people is shameful; it is sinful – submitting to fear, greed, and selfishness, rather than claiming mercy, justice, and love.

Through the lens of today's Gospel, the story goes this way: Jesus names the promise, the hope, that we as a nation of great abundance might offer new opportunity and access to goods and benefits for the poorest in our midst. How great is that!?! Grateful for this mantle of responsibility and promise, we commit ourselves to the noble task. Yet to be effective, it turns out we will need to change some things; we will need to shift economic controls away from those who now possess it, revise the incentives, redistribute the power. So we resist the challenging promise of our Lord's words. No. No; no. And Jesus' response? A sharp rebuke. Snap out of it! Get behind me, Satan.

You cannot receive a heart of flesh if you keep your heart of stone. You cannot bring about justice and mercy if you hoard all your wealth. You cannot be healed if you have to keep the eggs. You cannot do something new, be someone new, if you are unable or unwilling to let go what you have and know, to receive what God is offering.

For me on retreat, the uncomfortable tension got worse before it got better. Like Peter today, the words that penetrated first were about sacrifice, and cost, bearing my cross, giving something up. But as I stayed in prayer – and this is crucial: I stayed in prayer – with text after text offering promise, with increasing awareness that in the company of God, I am invited to trust; we are invited to trust, we are invited to love, we are invited to newness and abundant life, to claim the outrageous potential. So, with trepidation, our “no” turns to “yes.” And we take up the cross of Christ in the promise of new life.