

St. Ben's 9.3  
Pray

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, Holy One.

Today marks the first Sunday of the season of creation. Our theme for today is Pray. While I was thinking about how to incorporate that into my sermon for today along with our gospel text it took me back to when I was recovering from my most recent brain tumor surgery. For those of you who haven't heard me preach on this, I'm a brain cancer survivor, and about 8 years ago I had a recurrence of my tumor which was partially removed through surgery.

After the surgery, I had a really long recovery process that was very challenging. I needed a lot of help and let's just say I was not the best at accepting or asking for help at that time. It really humbled me and there were many days where all I could do was pray. Pray for the strength to get out of bed, for the strength to keep going with treatment, and for the patience to deal with all the helpful people around me. Some of them actually helpful and others not so much.

Most of my prayers were gratitude and others were anger that this was happening to me again but ultimately I just wanted to keep the channels of communication open with God.

In our text for today, we encounter another turn in Matthew's Gospel. We find Jesus turning his energy toward teaching the disciples about what it truly means for him to be the Messiah. Now that Peter has revealed that truth to this inner circle Jesus begins to go about sharing the reality of what his journey will entail. In this exchange between Peter and Jesus, we see the previously identified rock now become the stumbling block as Peter refuses to accept Jesus' suffering, saying "God Forbid it Lord" Jesus responds with, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block for me" indicating that Peter's priorities have gotten out of sync. That his focus on human things is misplaced. Even though Jesus has revealed himself as the Messiah to the disciples it becomes clear very quickly that they are resisting his teachings because the manner and mission of Christ are difficult to fathom.

One thing to note about our Gospel text today is that this passage introduces suffering into Christology, or who we know Jesus to be, and equates discipleship with such suffering. In addition to the interaction with Peter, we also find, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me". While everyone will have their own perspectives on this text, I want to offer an opportunity to engage with it in a way that does not equate suffering with discipleship.

What if, in this text, Jesus is asking us to consider how we impose our will on God when we put ourselves in Peter's shoes? When we become the stumbling blocks in our own faith journeys. When we lean into our human need for control and lose sight of God walking alongside us. One of the interesting things about this text is considering what it might mean to deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow Jesus. To lose one's life in the time of Christ was a literal possibility but in our modern context, it might mean a lifestyle change, going against a social norm, or becoming a new person on the inside as you claim a new identity as a Christian.

This looks different for everyone. While our lives often include great suffering, the ongoing message that it is necessary for salvation or discipleship can be dangerous and might not be in line with a life-giving, love-filled God. If we consider that the stumbling block in this text might be our need to protect our own image of who God is, how The Church exists and how we've always done things we might hear Jesus' call to lay it down as he says "get behind me,

Satan” recognizing that those tendencies are the stumbling blocks that keep us from moving forward as a community together.

Knowing that God walks alongside us as we keep the teachings of Christ at our core. Discernment and prayer become the vehicles of that work as we find ways to move forward together.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my sermon during my journey with cancer, finding time to pray was one of the most powerful things I did. I knew that God didn’t give me cancer even if the message I had been taught in the church of my youth felt different. I kept talking to God, knowing that God could handle my questions and my anger. I went back to church asking my big questions and finding some new answers. I found a community that helped me see that not everyone shared that vision of suffering. That as we pray and connect to God in our lives and in community, I found a new way to see this text. As I asked for help, the community responded. I could see how God was working in my life and the lives of others. They helped with food for me and my Dad, who was helping me with my recovery.

I had to get out of the way out of God’s way so that as I prayed I could hear God’s voice in the response. So that I could see God’s presence in meals shared by the church. In my changing attitudes about asking for help. In the patience my Dad and I had for each other during this very difficult time. That time of prayer and constant connection with God was an important part of my healing and an important reminder that our work is to move out of the way of what God is doing in our lives. To listen and watch for Christ in the world and how the Spirit is moving in our lives.

Our Gospel text is a reminder not to be that stumbling block for ourselves or our own communities but instead to remind that part of ourselves that tends toward control and perfectionism to “Get behind me Satan” and instead look for the path forward even if it’s a little awkward or uncomfortable.

My prayer for us all this week is that of the serenity prayer. Please join in if you know it.

God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. **Amen**