

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF GETHSEMANE

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Sermon for 06 October 2013

The Rev. Theo Park

So...after listening to this morning's gospel,
who would ever seek or accept a position of leadership in the church,
unless that someone were a died-in-the-wool masochist?
Here's what Jesus sounds like to most listeners:
“Don't you idiots get it? Try harder!
And don't expect any thanks from me or from God.
To know that you're working for us is all the thanks you need.”

Harsh.

Of course, neither I nor the scholars I consulted believe that's what is being said.
But it can sure sound that way.
Especially to over-burdened disciples past or present.
And the truth is, leadership in the church, ordained or lay, is never easy.

But what is the evangelist really trying to say here?
First--according to all the commentators I've read--the translation we hear is very poor.
When the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith,
rather than upbraid them for having too little,
the basic point of the parable he tells in reply is more accurately
“You already have all the faith you need; simply trust it.”

In other words, the Spirit is already acting in you,
you who were created in the image and likeness of God,
uniquely gifted, creative, resourceful, whole.
Believe in who you are; trust in your inheritance.
You will accomplish miracles.

But...

And now we're back in the realm of Luke's theme of the cost of discipleship.
This is nothing new to us: we've heard it over and over all summer.
The evangelist repeatedly warns the community of faith
that following Jesus is going to be difficult.
Using Jesus as a mouthpiece, he offers up example after example
that emphasize the cost of following this wandering rabbi:
no one can become a disciple without completely reordering the priorities of their lives,
family ties are to be regarded as secondary,

possessions are to be seen as disposable,
the kingdom of God must be your first priority, without wavering or looking back.
And, says Luke, this is the way it must be for leaders among those followers as well.
After all, the first shall be last...

For those of us who are called to exercise leadership in the church,
whether ordained or elected leaders or those with the natural charism of leadership,
this can sometimes be a difficult message to hear, to live up to.
We'd all like a little respect, to quote Rodney Dangerfield.
And, of course, we all deserve it.
Indeed, we pledge one another such basic respect in our baptismal covenant.
But acknowledgment, appreciation, thanks...
these things don't always come our way naturally in turn...or at all.
It's a little like being a parent or a teacher:
when your child is a teenager, when you stand before a classroom,
you seldom know what impact you're making in the moment.
Only over time is that, perhaps, revealed to you.
So, even though our human nature seeks a reward in the moment,
we are to offer the gift of ourselves and our best efforts out of love
and in faith that we are making a difference, and all to the glory of God.

Francis of Assisi knew this territory well.
His official day of observance was last Friday,
and we acknowledge him in our hymns this morning.
You probably know that Francis was a rich man's son and heir
who underwent a conversion moment in which he abandoned everything
in order to devote his life to following Christ.
He patterned his life on total poverty,
making this a requirement of the monastic order that grew up around him,
but at the same time he celebrated the abundance of God's creation.
In faith he trusted that God, who so richly clothed the lilies of the field,
would care equally for him and all those in God's care.
His deep sense of kinship with all creation has brought Francis
recognition as the patron saint of the environment and as a champion of peace.

Responding in love to the love of God he saw in Christ,
Francis mingled with people from all walks of life,
embracing them, sharing with them bread and the words of God.
Yet he was never ordained, was always viewed as suspect by the hierarchy of the church, and
repeatedly he had to fight roadblocks put in the path of his vision
of inclusion and a life built upon the values of God's kingdom rather than an earthly one.
During his lifetime he even saw dissension among his followers
that threatened to tear apart the fledgling order he had established.
When Francis died at the age of 44,
he left behind nothing that the world would consider as material wealth.

But if one counts as riches the fruits of the spirit and of a humble and a contrite heart, he was wealthy beyond measure, and left behind a legacy that survives, thrives, and changes lives even today.

In a heaven-oriented world to which untamed nature so often seemed more an enemy than something to embrace, Francis recaptured a biblical view of the goodness of creation.

In a hierarchical world where those at the top were often prideful and in an emerging world of commerce in which the winners were avaricious, Francis practiced humility and poverty.

In an increasingly complex world that loved subtlety and argumentation, Francis practiced simplicity.

And Francis's joy, which was never smothered by his own physical ills and failures, is a model especially to those who find themselves overcome by the world's problems and our failure to solve them.

So in the spirit of Francis, to all of you called to leadership-- and that is really everyone here, for we are all commissioned by our baptism to ministry in the name of Christ, both in the church and beyond these walls-- to all of you, all of us, in those moments when it feels that the job is too tough, the requirements too stringent, the rewards not tangible enough in the here and now, I offer these paraphrased lines from the epistle to Timothy; may you hear them as a prayer for you and to you and may they give you strength and courage to carry on:

Beloved child of God:

I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.

Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in others and now, I am sure, lives in you.

I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you;

for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice,

but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

Rely on this power of God, who saves us and calls us with a holy calling,

not according to our works but according to God's own purpose and grace.

In the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus,

guard the good treasure entrusted to you,

with the help of the Holy Spirit living in you.

Amen.