

Sermon Preached September 13, 2009
Year B, Proper 19
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

There's a story of a young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application blank that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received this letter from the college: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."¹

In today's gospel Jesus outlines what it means to be HIS follower. After being asked by Jesus questions about his identity, Peter figures out that Jesus is the Messiah, he just doesn't understand what that means. For Peter, the Messiah is a human savior who sides with the Israelites against the Roman Empire which is occupying their country. The Messiah is powerful and righteous and will lead

¹ S. I. McMillen, in his book None of These Diseases, at <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/follower.htm>,

God's people out of earthly slavery and into freedom. When Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, this is what he has in mind. But Jesus bursts his bubble by explaining a very different understanding of the Messiah.

Jesus isn't there to save one group of people from being conquered by Rome, but to save all people from evil and death. Christ's interpretation of the Messiah is much more extensive than Peter's. When Jesus talks of suffering and death, it's the antithesis of what Peter has in mind. So Peter gets worried and scolds Jesus. What Peter doesn't understand is that Christ's suffering and death is the way to a much more profound salvation and freedom than he could ever imagine. Peter is thinking of human things and not the divine. Jesus tells all the disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." He is warning them that following him is not the way to earthly glory, but may involve suffering and sacrifice.

There are a variety of Christian denominations, all which have their own weaknesses and strengths. They each have their own passions. This comes from the rich diversity of scripture which we use. For instance, some churches emphasize the importance of faith. They focus on passages like those found in the book of Romans which says "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law." These churches stress the importance of faith, prayer, and

Bible study. They actively recruit people to come to faith and believe that Jesus is Lord -- all of which is wonderful and true. The downside to this is these churches can become very inwardly focused. Issues of faith are their only purpose. They become so concerned with who believes and who doesn't believe, that they don't notice whether or not their neighbor has enough food or shelter.

On the other hand there are those churches who define themselves by emphasizing other parts of scripture. The letter from James which we read last week is a perfect example. He writes, "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Churches which emphasize passages like this often have great outreach ministries. They tend the poor, the homeless, the sick and suffering. They give of themselves as Christ did to help those in need, which is fabulous and right. The downside to these churches is they can become very outwardly focused.

What one believes inwardly, matters of faith, are irrelevant. When they do not tend to people's spiritual needs, these churches can become little more than glorified social service agencies.

What churches ideally strive for is a balance and recognition of the need for both faith and works. This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Scripture highlights for us the importance of both. Salvation is by faith. We can do nothing to help ourselves, everything is from God. However, faith without works is dead. If

our faith doesn't bubble up in us as action, if we don't show our faith by good deeds and living life in accordance with God, then it isn't real faith. Faith is first, but it is meaningless without action.

When Jesus asks Peter the million dollar question, he's pleased that Peter recognizes him and believes him to be the Christ. Peter has faith. But Christ wants him to go one step farther, to follow it with action. Jesus wants Peter to take up his cross and follow him. Following Jesus means doing what he does: assisting the poor, helping the sick and those in prison, going to die for the sake of the gospel if necessary. True faith causes us to take action; true faith has consequences.

I think St. Paul's is doing a pretty good job of following Jesus. Just look at the Ministry Opportunities Booklet you were handed this morning. There are a remarkable number of people following Jesus at this church! Through its pages you can see we seek to deepen our faith through worship, song, education, Bible study, retreats, and discussion. We follow that faith by works through participation in the many ministries of the parish. Works done out of a deep faith are not only those done to help the poor, but anything we do. It means how we live our lives. Ushers, Worship Leaders, and Readers are living out their faith by assisting in worship. So are acolytes, choir members, and those on the altar guild. That is work. Any ministry of the church is a form of good works: the Stewardship committee,

the Vestry, teaching in the Sunday school, organizing the ECW, and so on.

However, the classic understanding of good works is found in what we do for outreach, how we help those outside the parish. We have Undies Sundays, contributions to Communities Together, birthdays at Hancock Courts, Gifts for needy children at Christmas. The proceeds from the Faire go to outreach. Even offering our Parish Hall to two AA groups every week is a form of outreach. We are a generous church! This is not to say we can rest on our laurels, there is still much more we all can do, but we have a lot of good role models here.

Following Jesus means more than simply saying we believe in God in Christ, but acting it out in our lives.

At first the disciple Peter is thrilled to recognize that Jesus is the Messiah because he thinks this means the Israelites will be freed and he will follow on Christ's coattails to glory. He just needs to have faith in this strong and wise leader and the things of this world will be made right. How surprised he is to discover that salvation involves not only the suffering and death of the Messiah, but a commitment of works and right living on his part in this life. Peter must deny himself and follow Christ, regardless of the cost. Faith results in actions.

If we have faith, it cannot help but affect our lives. Good works will flow out naturally. Works don't earn us salvation. We don't do good works because this will

make God love us or get us to heaven. God already loves us and heaven can begin right here on earth. However, if we truly love God, we cannot help but let that love overflow into the world with good works. And this means more than simply helping with projects at church or elsewhere. “Good works” means how we live our lives 24/7. Faith impacts everything we do, everything we believe, all our decisions, and all our relationships.

How we live and what we do is a reflection of who we are. If we are a faithful Christian, then our life will, by its very nature, be one of good works. As faithful followers of Jesus, as faithful disciples, we will live our lives with both faith and good works.

Amen.