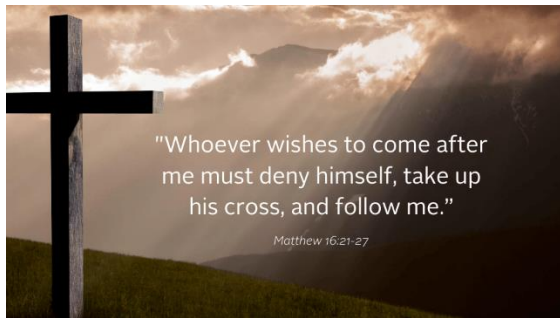


Homily - September 2nd and 3rd, 2023 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time



If you're my age or older, you might remember some of the detective shows that were popular on T.V. back in the 1970s. They included Barnaby Jones, Mannix, The Rockford Files, Hawaii Five-O, Cannon, and the list goes on. I particularly got a kick out of Cannon, because he was too fat to chase down criminals on foot, so he would run them over with his big 8-cylinder Lincoln Continental. Every crook Cannon brought to the police station had tire tracks on his back from getting run over. My mother, who never had a moment to herself, could never watch a full episode of any of these shows without one of us eight children interrupting with, "Mommy, is he a good guy?" And then 20 seconds later, "Mommy, what about that guy, is he a bad guy?" Life was simple; everyone in our world, as children, was either a good guy or a bad guy. It kind of reminds me of the gospel passage we just heard, a continuation of last weekend's gospel story.

Last weekend we popped the cork on expensive champagne celebrating Peter's brilliant answer, "***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.***" No truer words were spoken. This week we are back to cheap wine (like the stuff you guys make in your garage and give me for Christmas) with Jesus calling Peter, "***Satan.***" As the saying goes, Peter goes from hero to zero in a matter of minutes. He's a good guy one moment and a bad guy the next. This is a continuation of last weekend's story where we found Jesus and his disciples in a place called Caesarea Philippi, a Roman army base of 25, 000 soldiers. There, in front of a sheer cliff over 100 feet high and 500 feet wide, full of pagan statues, Jesus asked his disciples to reach deep inside of themselves, and answer the question, "***Who do you say that I am?***" In front of this massive 100-foot by 500-foot rock Peter proclaimed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus then says that on *this* rock, the rock of Peter's faith (and not that rock wall behind him), he will build his church.

We never really know what we are made of until we are presented with a challenge, a test. The challenge usually brings out our true colors. Peter was presented with a challenge. Difficult times tend to bring the best or the worst out of people. The COVID crisis brought out the best in most people but also the worst

in others. Likewise, when a hurricane blows out the windows of a downtown business, most people either rally to help the storeowner while others see this as an opportunity to loot the place and carry off stolen goods.

This fickleness, this propensity to move from being praised one minute and the next minute facing the truth that, like Peter, we are a stumbling block, is in all of us. Like Peter, every one of us is both the solution and part of the problem at the same time. We might ask, “How did Peter, the first pope, get it so right one moment and a few verses later get it so wrong?” Like I said, it’s true of all of us—both sides, good and evil, coexist in the same person.

A young man, wanting to become holy, preferably in the shortest amount of time possible, approached an old monk hoping to get some quick answers, some shortcuts to holiness. He asked the old monk, “Do you still wrestle with the devil?” The old monk answered, “Oh, no. I gave that up long ago. Now I wrestle only with God.” “With God!” the young man exclaimed in astonishment. “And do you hope to win?” “No, not at all,” said the old monk, “I hope to lose.”

In the first half of life spirituality, you have to fight the “Devil,” but in the second half of life, you should be fighting God. In the first half of life, as we journey toward God, we are very much like Peter in last Sunday’s gospel. We tend to live, and prefer to live, in a dualistic world. In that world, we pride ourselves in knowing right from wrong, good from bad, and think ourselves quite smart because we always choose the correct side. We are always the good guy, never the bad guy. In this initial stage, we see ourselves as champions of all things associated with Jesus. We are on his team, and we are going to straighten out all the evil in the world. We resolutely turn our backs on the pagan gods of the Canaanites and Romans, and we proudly profess Jesus as “the Christ, Son of the living God.” We are wrestling with the devil, and we are convinced that we are winning. In the second half of life spirituality, when we are no longer fighting the devil but wrestling with God, we move beyond the black and white world of dualistic thinking. This is Peter’s big learning curve in today’s gospel. Notice he is not fighting the devil, as he was in last weekend’s gospel; he’s fighting the Lord.

We all have to start off in the world of dualistic thinking, in the world where we perceive things as black and white, in a world where we hear Jesus’ words, “You cannot serve God and money” (Mt. 6:24). We all need, in the early stage of

spiritual development, boundaries, borders, and clarity. But that's just the starting point. It's sad when I see people in their 60s, 70s, and 80s still asking me, "Father, is this a sin? Is this a venial sin or is it a mortal sin?" It's even sadder when it's someone in their 20s. That's the old dualistic world that seeks security in easy answers rather seeking security in God alone. Apparently, Jesus is asked 183 questions in the four gospels but only gives answers to three. Rather than giving answers that affirm the imperial ego in all of us, Jesus prefers to accompany us on journeys. When Jesus invited Peter on a journey to Jerusalem where Peter will witness the Lord's own suffering and be killed, he immediately rebuked Jesus by saying, "**God forbid it, Lord!**" Peter would rather be affirmed with words like, "You are a rock," and "I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" much more than being invited on a journey.

Jesus is inviting Peter then, as he is inviting us now, to journey from first half of life spirituality to second half of life spirituality. In the second half of life, we don't fight the devil; we fight God. And in fighting God, we hope to lose, to surrender. In the first half of life, we are so convinced that our efforts are all good and not motivated by anything but pure love of God. In the first half of life spirituality you clench your fist and never say "surrender." Everything is perceived as a battle against the forces of evil, and we are going to be triumphant.

In the second half of life, you gradually give up the dualistic thinking, the kind of thinking that puts evil over there and never inside of you. In the second half of life, you realize that you are praised by the Lord one moment ("you are a rock") and corrected the next moment ("You are Satan and a stumbling block"). Oh, great. The party's over. But while the party's over, you've come to a deeper truth that you are a mixture, and will die a mixture, of good and evil. It's that mixture of good and evil that we need to love in ourselves. It's that mixture of good and evil that we need to love in others. It's that mixture of good and evil that ultimately is loved and redeemed by God. It's the only thing God can love in us.

Maybe that's why Jesus says in today's gospel account, "If you don't lose your life, if you're in this to gain your life, you haven't understood what I'm talking about. You're missing the point." Like Peter, all of us start the journey largely out of self-interest (how true that is in my life). At that stage we're still fighting the devil and passing it on as "love of God," but it isn't. Whoever wishes to save his/her own life must lose it, because it's still about "you" and your private gateway to heaven. It's

not about God, truth, love, others, or the bigger world until something in us dies. This is the dying Peter doesn't want to hear about and neither do we if we were honest with ourselves.

The freedom of the second half of life spirituality is the ability to hold the paradox, or the many paradoxes, of life together. If we stay with Jesus, if we journey with him into the paradox of his own suffering and death, and wrestle with God, we will eventually experience reconciliation. All things that seem at odds with other things finally come together in a unity that only God can bring about. Paradoxes will be more than O.K., because we'll finally be in a fight with God with the hopes of losing. Surrender will lead us all to a truth and a love that will ultimately be victorious.

-Fr. Phil