

Keep Your Mind on Divine Things
11 Pentecost, Proper 17
Rev Judi Sato
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Matthew 16:21-28

The setting for today's gospel immediately picks up after last week's. Jesus has just congratulated Peter for his recognition that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God." But now Jesus begins a process of reinterpreting what being the Messiah really means – and what following that Messiah entails for the disciples. He is going to be turned over by the religious authorities, and then he's going to be beaten by the Romans and be killed, but on the third day be raised. This is not what Peter was expecting. The Jews have been looking for their Messiah for over 500 years and this Messiah is now telling them he's going to die? So it is ironic that Peter would pray "God forbid it, Lord!" when God himself is the one to tell them what's happening. To top it all off Jesus turns around and rebukes Peter – calling him Satan, and a stumbling block. Wow, that was quick. Peter was promoted to the Rock – the church's foundation one minute - and the in next – demoted to Satan. And the next thing Jesus says is really important – "for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

It was very logical to not want your Messiah arrested, beaten and killed. They want their Messiah alive and well to re-unite their Kingdom – to get it back to the way it was when David was king. But God wants something better. He wants to unite the whole world and bring it into the Kingdom of God. And to do that he needs to defeat death first and be raised from the dead. Human things – power and might to defeat the intruders. Divine things: humility and sacrifice. Only God could have that foresight.

In a way it is comforting to know that Peter had his ups and downs with Jesus. It makes us feel a little bit better knowing we won't get it right all the time. My question, and I think for many others as well is: how do we know if we are following the ways of man or the ways of God? Well, I have a couple of illustrations to help us figure it out because as we can see it isn't always obvious.

Many years ago some friends and I would go out and celebrate when it was our birthday. We'd take a night off; our husbands would watch the kids and we would honor each other and have a nice night out. We would treat the birthday girl royally – we'd pay for her dinner and we'd bring a small gift. Eventually we started inviting other friends from church to join us and our group kept getting bigger. We would all show up at the restaurant and I'd bring the confetti and streamers and I had this musical candle that played "Happy Birthday to you" that we'd put on the birthday girl's dessert. It was a wonderful time of celebration and honoring of our friends. We called it the Birthday club and everyone at church was invited to join – it was a very popular group. We'd often have several people celebrating their birthdays during the month, so we'd pick a date the birthday girls were available and let everyone know and those who were available would show up. We'd usually have over a dozen. The restaurant loved us!

Then things started to change. Someone made the suggestion that not everyone could afford to bring a present and they felt bad about that. In order to protect their feelings, it was suggested we stop bringing presents. So we would just bring a card for each birthday girl. Next, someone made the suggestion that not everyone could afford a birthday card, so why don't we have someone volunteer each month to buy a card for each of the birthday girls and we'd all sign it. These all sound like good and reasonable suggestions don't you think? Well, it turns out no one volunteered to bring the cards, so a few times, we didn't have any – but at least we got to get together and buy someone's dinner and celebrate their birthday. Finally, someone thought all the guess work on when we were getting together was confusing people and causing them to miss the celebration, so they thought we should pick a regular date, like the third Thursday of the month, and hold the celebration on that date. The first month we tried that – none of the birthday celebrants could come on that date. That was the end of the Birthday club - it died.

What happened? We took the focus off of the one we were honoring and focused on the ones whose pride was preventing them from participating. We focused on making it easy for everyone but the honored one. We zapped the spirit right out of the celebration because of our good intentions. But good can be the enemy of best. What we really did was baby people's pride and robbed them of the opportunity to be sacrificial in their giving. **Humility and sacrifice** are the signs of having our mind on divine things and not on human things.

Another way Jesus puts this is “for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who want to lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?”

Recall the kind of feeling you have when someone praises you, when you are approved, accepted, applauded. Now contrast that with the kind of feeling that arises within you when you look at the sunset or the sunrise or Nature in general, or when you are helping someone with a flat tire, or opening a door for them. Get the taste of this feeling and contrast it with the first, the one that was generated within you when you were praised. In each contrasting situation there is joy, there is even happiness – but you can see that the source of these feelings are so very different and it affects the quality of those feelings. Understand that the first type of feeling comes from self-glorification, pride. It is a worldly feeling. The second comes from somewhere else – from the Holy Spirit.

Here there is another contrast: Recall the kind of feeling you have when you succeed, when you have made it, when you get to the top, when you win a game or a bet or an argument. Now contrast it with the kind of feeling you get when you really enjoy the job you are doing, when you are absorbed in something you knew you were born to do. Once again notice the qualitative difference between the worldly feeling and the divine feeling.

And finally, here is a modern day parable: A group of tourists sits in a bus that is passing through gorgeous beautiful country – lakes, mountains, waterfalls, and green fields. But the shades are pulled down over the windows. They do not have the slightest idea of what lies

beyond the windows of the bus. Instead, the passengers are spending all their time squabbling over who will have the seat of honor in the bus and who will be applauded. And so they remain till the journey's end. (Adapted from Anthony De Mello's book *The Way to Love*)

Where in your life are you traveling with the blinds down? Would you be willing to go against the crowd and open the blinds? To gaze in wonder at God's marvelous creation and become a part of it?

Again – humility and sacrifice – the key to discerning the divine from the worldly. To be in on the mission of God's Messiah is to be blessed with a mind and vision that looks at things not from a human perspective but from the perspective of what God is about.

Last week Fr. Ken asked you to ponder your answer to the question Jesus asked his disciples: "Who do you say I am?" He mentioned ways that helped him get to know Jesus better: through bible study, and through Cursillo to name a couple. What helped me were worship, bible study, Cursillo and getting involved in my church – making a difference.

Here is my question: What can we do here at St. Stephen's, what can we provide to help you answer that question of who Jesus is and develop your relationship with God so it is easier to discern the divine things over the worldly things? We have bible studies. A Cursillo is coming next May. What areas would you like to explore for ministry? Take a few minutes to think about what we can do to help pull up the blinds on the bus. *Amen.*