

Crazy Wonderful

Proper 17, Year A, RCL. Matthew 16:21-28. The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost. August 28, 2011. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

Good advice can seem contradictory. For example, wise people tell us to develop consistent good habits, so that doing the right thing becomes as automatic as possible. Then they tell us to think outside the box. Of course, flexibility in approaching problems (or opportunities!) is a good habit to have, too. But it does seem hard to get it right every time, doesn't it? You can be so sure...and still not hit the bull's eye or even come close.

One of the world-class examples of this is the contrast between last Sunday's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew and this Sunday's. Last Sunday Jesus was praising Peter to the skies because he had opened his heart to the Heavenly Father and thus knew Jesus to be the Messiah, the one anointed by God to bring God's kingdom on earth. Peter was probably voicing the consensus of the whole core group of twelve disciples. But now, in today's reading—and probably once again voicing the consensus of the twelve—Peter is appalled when Jesus announces that he (Jesus) must walk into the lion's den of his enemies in Jerusalem and get himself executed. So Peter says to Jesus, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!”

Well, we know how Jesus responds: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me!” Which amounts to saying, “Get out of my way! You're presenting me with a huge temptation!” The temptation is, of course, to bring in God's kingdom the way most people like the disciples expected. That is, to be a conqueror and a ruler after the manner of King David and King Solomon of old, only a quantum leap more so.

I've talked about that theme before, how the way of worldly conquest and domination is not the way of God's kingdom, not the way of the kingdom of heaven. I'm only mentioning it by explaining why the error Peter expressed earned so strong a response. What I want to talk about is how understandable the error was in the first place.

The Twelve, that is, the core group of Jesus' disciples, were not dummies. Peter could be a bit dense, but he was more stalwart and steady than he was a blockhead. (Peter was, of course, his nickname, the equivalent of our nickname Rocky, which has both positive and negative connotations.) Jesus had chosen these twelve guys for their potential to be the core leadership group of the movement he knew would follow his earthly ministry. He was preparing them to take advantage of the most spectacular opportunity the world has ever seen, and he didn't have much time. Jesus had to get them as ready as he could to receive the one-two punch of his death and resurrection. He had to at least get them thinking about what God's plan really was, as opposed to their previous expectations.

And Jesus had to do it the way God does it: one step at a time. Human beings make their way along the road of life with a certain...unsteadiness. God expects a certain amount of confusion, inefficient learning, inconsistent application, and downright sabotage of the divine will by even the best human beings. Even the *very* best of us, our Lord himself, who never sabotaged the will of his Heavenly Father, had to grow gradually into the full stature of his Messiahship. God has to be very patient with us, very much on-message, very flexible in his approach, and very humble—willing to do anything, including dying under torture, to get our attention and make sure we have a decent shot at getting his point.

So we can't be too tough on the disciples. They are like us. They *are* us. They are Exhibit A of how hard it is to profoundly, truly, completely *get it* about God and what God is up to, what he expects of us, how he wants to relate to us.

And we don't have much time, either. Jesus had about three years, or maybe less, to get that bunch of very capable yet very human followers to the point where the shock of his death and resurrection could—under the influence of the Holy Spirit—galvanize them into the right kind of action rather than shattering them completely. Jesus' training program worked, but it was a near thing; we see how the Twelve barely maintained cohesion as a group after Jesus' arrest and execution. But then came the Holy Spirit, the gift that changed everything, that made it all make sense, that renewed the energy and purpose of Jesus' disciples. The disciples were still carrying their crosses—that is, they still operated under the requirement for self-sacrifice in the face of the world's resistance—but they had a greater capacity than before for consistency, flexibility and...how shall I put it...knowing the right direction.

We, like those disciples, have been chosen by God to operate under the requirement for self-sacrifice in the face of the world's resistance. We have time enough to learn the ways of kingdom of heaven, though none too much time. We have time to discover the energy and purpose of God, though none too much time. The good news is, the story is a comedy. Looking back, after the Resurrection, it looks like a slapstick circus show: We come through by the skin of our teeth, tripping like awkward clowns with gigantic chrome-yellow shoes over the lopsided lime-green stumbling blocks evil puts in our way, falling on our big round red noses—and then getting up and dancing away, giving Satan the raspberry over our shoulder just as one of his minions drops another lime-green boulder in our path. Over we go again!

But it can't last—which is the good side of our not having all the time in the world to find God in the brouhaha, because...how does Satan, that silly old devil, think he can win in the end? All along, while he's sneaking around as if God can't see him, God is rescuing people from flaming houses with his crazy fire truck! God, in the midst of the whoops and the pratfalls, is on the lookout for us.

It looks crazy impossible from this side of the Cross, the side where each of us carries our cross with Jesus to the final hilltop. But it looks crazy wonderful from the other side. That's what Jesus was telling his disciples. That's what he's telling us. We've won! Or rather, God has. And whoever and whatever has not figured that out by the end of the show, well, for them, the lights will just... gradually...go out.