

# *SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS*

The Second Sunday in Lent

March 12, 2006

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*At the Glory Junction*

Texts: Mark 8:31-38

What is striking about the Gospel reading this morning is the conflict between Jesus and Peter. In our world full of conflict, this doesn't come across as good news, does it? We will have to look harder for the good news that is there.

From what St. Mark tells us the Jesus movement is gathering steam. Larger and larger crowds meet them at every turn. Peter has witnessed Jesus' extraordinary charisma with the divine at the Transfiguration. All systems are "Go!" They have a winning ticket to glory and power. They've made it!

At precisely this exciting juncture with glory, Jesus sharpens the focus on his vision. For in the heady moments of success, the lust for glory among power seekers, especially in unstable and fearful times, is both seductive and destructive.

Last Friday evening Washington insiders, on both sides of the aisle now, admitted stunningly that the Bush administration's relationship with Congress has been the most arrogant in the history of the Republic. Many of us have suspected that for years.

I must tell you that it is very difficult to speak this way prophetically from this pulpit when all we can know is what we learn from a cowering press and a couple of friends who work in Washington. But unfortunately it seems our worst fears are now being borne out by the witness of those closer to the power culture of Washington.

The pull of imperial glory, in the power vacuum created by the loss of the Soviet Union, seems to have seduced the White House to turn the United States from a powerful, respected partner in the family of nations into the big imperious bully on the block.

Lust for glory blinds, and their arrogant use of the sword seems to have produced a hollow war, a mess, destabilizing the world more than since before WWII. "Mission Accomplished" -- remember that? It still haunts me for an arrogance and blindness that many men and women are now paying for in Iraq.

In the Gospel reading we see the same symptoms of the glory disease in Peter. A fisherman has been handed the opportunity of a lifetime -- handed a ticket to glory to grab a big slice of the fame and wealth pie.

Against that background we now can see how radical Jesus words are, then and now: "As your leader, I am going to undergo great suffering, total rejection by the powers you adore, and be killed." This is anti-glory talk from an anti-hero. No wonder Peter, truly the budding leader, takes Jesus aside and tries to talk some sense into him; tries to pull Jesus out of this negative mood, "We have come so far Jesus. The glory of the world will be at our feet. We are not going to win with this sort of talk out of you. Pull yourself together!"

One must not underestimate the depths Jesus is plumbing here -- cutting into the core arrogance and instinct of human lust for wealth and power. And now arise his words to Peter, "Get behind me you Satan, for you are setting your mind not on God but on human things." That is the context of the conflict: at the glory junction.

Part of the theme of our Lenten journey is letting go. Letting go what holds us back from life in Christ. Jesus is saying to Peter, "Let go of this lust for glory and wealth. You may get just what you want, but you'll kill people and destroy human community to grab it -- and for what? To be bored in your luxuries, bored to death -- always looking for more, and always glancing over your shoulder for the assassin who lusts to be in your place. Let it go and follow me."

Very few of us have to let go that kind of power. But that doesn't mean we have nothing like that to let go. The need to be important. The need to accumulate wealth. The seduction of consumerism in the acquisition of gadgets we rarely use but have to have. Let it all go. Simplify your life. This is what Jesus means to us when he calls us to "deny ourselves and follow him."

But there are other kinds of burdens we can let go. Christ says, "Take up your cross and follow me." Unfortunately, we often carry crosses piled up with the burdens from our past. Regrets over missed opportunities. Guilt over a divorce. Guilt over moral failure. Guilt over our parents or siblings or friends. Guilt over guilt! If we let those regrets go too, that cross will get lighter.

But how? Talk to a therapist. Talk to your pastor who might recommend you talk to a therapist. Therapy takes time, so be patient. From there you might be advised to make closure with the living; and as regards the dead, to observe closure in private confession with your pastor. Taking up Christ's cross has its burdens, but Christ promises that this

burden is light. We make it heavy with our unresolved burdens.

Lent: Lifting up and letting go. We lift up to God in prayer and praise our deepest feelings and yearnings. Jesus' words in the Gospel this morning have traversed very deep human feelings and yearnings. Our instincts, from a million years of evolutionary survival, seduce us to yearn for the grandiose, for glory, for power and wealth, for their empty trophies.

Christ invites you into this community of faith to hear an empowering Word of grace from a God who gives us the gift of faith because of Jesus, the God who fell in love with us all at Creation, a God who courted Sarah and Abraham who, in turn, began a long, long journey together that today embraces synagogues, mosques, temples and churches like St. Francis on Church Street.

In this faith community, God's grace feeds us through the Gospel of Word and Sacrament, replacing raw instinct with moral nurture and love. For our instincts seduce us into self-centered glory, while the grace of God in Christ gently and gradually empowers us to care deeply for the healing and nurture of the very broken world.

This is something of what Jesus means when he says, "If you want to become my follower, you must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me." That denial is not some horrible mortification of your body but a life lived for others, that cross is not some burdensome sadness and otherworldliness, but your learning how to replace raw human instincts with the same gracious freedom as Jesus was given to love a broken world. Then, at the end of your life, you will surely know joyously what Jesus meant by the words, "Christ will come in the glory of God and the holy angels."

*Amen*

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