

# SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

September 17, 2006 – Pentecost 15b

Text: Mark 8:27-38

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## “Honoring the Little Ones”

What I like about this Gospel reading is how Peter gets it right and then in the next breath gets it all wrong. And yet Jesus never gives up on him. Indeed Peter will become a leader of the emerging church -- a lesson in how God's grace redeems humans for goodness.

What does Peter get right? He identifies Jesus as God's anointed one, Messiah, Christ, the bearer of good news of a new relationship with God.

I'm sure Peter feels very proud of himself, grinning and carrying himself as teacher's pet. I would imagine the other disciples, true to form, greet Peter's pride with smirks of envy and affective disdain.

This moment of celebrity only convinced Peter that he had made the right gamble -- leaving his fishing business for this born leader, Jesus. “Wow, the investment is really going to pay off hundreds fold! I was right. He is the Messiah and now it can only get better, more political power and the good life almost in reach!”

This kind of calculator thinking clicked in Peter's head until Jesus calls the disciples into a circle to teach them more deeply about the coming new relationship with God. Peter couldn't wait. This could only mean more good career news, more money, more success, more power, and fame. A bit of violence, yes. But that's the way the world is. If we are going to ride fame and power we have to show the sword. But Jesus will carry the day.

Then Jesus begins to tell of his coming suffering, rejection by the elite and his death, death, and Peter's jaw drops in disbelief. When Jesus had finished, the other disciples were probably stunned into silence, but Peter, the really good student of Jesus, feels it is time for him to act, to show his leadership -- of course with deference, but to take Jesus aside and get to the bottom of this bad mood of defeat. After all, one more speech like that and it will really hurt our cause, our careers. We need winning speeches.

However deferential Peter starts out, he is soon rebuking Jesus. This isn't very cool and gets Jesus so upset that he even calls Peter the manifestation of Satan! Wow! Pretty hot stuff.

Of course, it's easy for us to see how Peter was so wrong -- after the fact. It's so easy for us to say that Peter was thinking like a power-hungry ambitious man right when Jesus comes to see that his own violent death is inevitable. It's so easy for us. Or is it?

This Gospel is not just talking about the loves and hates of Peter and Jesus. This Gospel is Gospel because it is addressing us with the same stark choices; of the paradox of this cross, the paradox of following the Messiah not for success and wealth but with burden and sacrifice; of the paradox of giving up your life so you can truly find it. For, if we live and walk through these real life paradoxes, a new spirituality emerges. A new spirituality that only then will make good sense -- a wisdom that the seduction of the accumulation of wealth and power, Peter's game plan and too often our own, will not bring that peace and security we long for.

This is a teaching moment. Jesus recognizes this and, turning to the crowds, he offers them that new Way. I wonder how many heard? Peter would have to wait until the slaughter and disaster had befallen before he opened himself to hear it properly. But again, as Gospel it addresses us. Do we hear its Gospel?

For this is the elephant in this room. And this elephantine reality is that a church is a holy and ethical vision. It is justice, it is compassion -- and we, like Peter, are either unreachable, or unwilling, or willing but in half measures. It is the elephant of holiness and it crushes us as it crushes Peter.

But among the crowds some people see the elephant, some hear. And they probably are not the learned, nor the well-to-do. Some in the crowds had the purity of heart to hear in Jesus' words and to see in him: God speaking, God breathing, God preaching.

So who were these people? Why the little people, of course! The little people who hear Jesus and see God; who feed from the bread of life so gratefully like the little birds who work so hard each day to find their food. The little people, like my mom who had a fourth grade education but a doctorate in her uncanny, transparent ability, like Edith Bunker, to get to the good heart of things.

We begin our celebrations of the 100th year of the dedication of this building and you will see downstairs, on 101-year-old ledger sheets, the gifts of the big people for which we are grateful. But when you honor them, don't forget the little people who, earning a few dollars a week cleaning homes or long hours in the big people's factories, paradoxically gave so much more than probably most of the big ones to build this holy place.

Why does God bless the little ones, the Edith Bunkers of this world, and the little birds of the air? To remind us of grace. Grace -- that God's values are simple but hard to see. For the little ones hear, see and show us God. They build this church and remind us of the enduring power and reality of God's grace in humanly perceived weakness. We give them thanks this day also.

*Amen*

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