

Pentecost 17B – Proper 21B (9/27/09 – Be Who You Are)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ. My pastoral advice to you today, based on our *Holy Gospel* from St. Mark chapter 9, is simply: ***Be Who You Are***. Now you might wonder at this at first – it’s not too different from the advice: *Just be yourself*. And when we look at ourselves – objectively ... honestly ... Scripturally – well, that often doesn’t seem to be too good.

After all, today once again we see one of Christ’s Apostles thinking (and acting) in a manner contrary to the will of our Lord. If John can’t get it right, what about us?! I mean, John! – one of the inner circle ... saw the Transfiguration ... the Disciple whom Jesus loved ... the one who leaned upon our Lord’s chest as they reclined at the Last Supper ... the first of the Apostles to see the empty tomb – John didn’t get it right. He seems to be jealous of the disciples’ position ... and he’s not alone – didn’t we just hear Jesus rebuke them for arguing over who was greatest? ***Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your Name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.*** [Mk 9.38] Since the man wasn’t one of them, well, he didn’t have the right to do good in the Name of Jesus – he had to be stopped. ***But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in My Name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. For the one who is not against us is for us.”*** [9.39-40]

As an aside, we need to set this Word of our Lord beside another one found in MATTHEW 12:30, where Jesus says: ***Whoever is not with Me is against Me.*** In other words, there is no fence-sitting with our Savior. A person is either for Him / with Him ... or against Him (and against His Church at large). Or to put it in terms of the next portion of our text: a person will either be in the Kingdom of God ... or in the unquenchable fire of hell – there is no third option. But back to the main point.

So John – and the other Apostles – are not to be jealous if the Lord uses others to do His wonderful work on earth. Neither are we to be. Nor are we to think of ourselves more highly than we ought – but we often do ... think of ourselves too highly. And on the other hand, we are to be God’s instrument to bring ***back a sinner from his wandering*** (as JAMES puts it in our *Epistle* [5.20]). When we see our fellow Christians (or our fellow mankind) in need – especially if they are struggling with sin and faith – each

of us should be ready to serve the Lord's servants with a word of encouragement (or even exhortation if needed) ... and to point to Christ.

And our serving doesn't have to be anything so great as casting out demons ... or even sharing the message of Christ directly. When our Lord says: *Truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward*, our Savior is pointing to the importance of simply fulfilling our God-given vocations – wherever we find ourselves, wherever He has placed us. So parents, when they parent in Christ's Name and according to His will, are doing a wonderful work in the Lord. And children, in simply obeying parents, are doing a mighty work in the Lord. Indeed, every legitimate, daily task that a Christian does in faith is a good and blessed work in the eyes of God.

The problem is, of course, that we don't do our God-given tasks very well. As parents, we get angry ... or selfishly look for our own ease instead of teaching, nurturing, and disciplining. As children, we rebel against our parents ... and other authorities. And instead of aiding and encouraging ... instead of giving the cup of water ... instead of using our hands to help ... instead of using our feet to go on Godly errands ... instead of using our eyes to read God's Word or to see our brother or sister in need ... and doing good – we use them to sin. Indeed, not only use them to sin **ourselves**, but use them to place a stumbling block before **others** – little ones ... little ones in the faith ... and those whose faith is still little – causing them to fall into sin.

So we need to have our hands and feet lopped off ... our eyes torn out [Mk 9.43-48]. And even **that** wouldn't be enough; because we could literally remove all of our members – every last one of them – and we would **still** manage to sin. For the hand that steals or kills isn't the beginning of the problem – just the outward sign. The feet that walk into sin aren't the root of the problem – just the outward instrument. The real problem is in our minds ... our sinful thoughts ... and in our hearts ... our sinful desires. So if we would follow our Lord's line of thinking to its end, we also need our brains and hearts cut out. The bottom line is, the only way we can stop sinning is if *a great millstone ... were hung around [our] neck and [we] were thrown into the sea* [Mk 9.42]. Only then would we stop sinning ... or being a stumbling block that causes others to sin. Only if we should die.

But we have, you know – died. Not physically ... but in the way that

counts ... through our Holy Baptism. *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by Baptism into death.* That's what God says through His Apostle, St. Paul [ROM 6.3-4]. And He goes on: *We know that our old self* – that sinful self with sinning hand and feet and eyes and brain and heart – *our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.* [6.6-7]

So in our Baptism the millstone has been hung around our neck and we have been *thrown into the sea* – into the waters of Holy Baptism to which God has attached His Word and promise. Our sinful self has been put to death – crucified and buried with Christ our Lord. And not only that, but also we have been *raised from the dead by the glory of the Father* just like our Lord Jesus Christ [ROM 6.4]. Thus, by God's work we now *walk in newness of life* – in the newness of **Christ's** life. His life is ours – just like His death has been made our own. And so we are new in Christ ... since He has saved our souls from death, covering the multitude of our sins – and the sins of the whole world – with His perfect hands and feet and eyes and heart ... indeed, with His holy Body and innocent Blood.

As the Father says of His Christ through the Prophet Isaiah: *He was CUT OFF from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken* [ISA 53.8]. Having been made sin **for us**, Christ our Lord was **cut off** from this life – in order that we might not be cut off from God but be His forgiven children. Our Savior let **His** hands be crippled **in our stead** on the accursed Tree – stretched out and cruelly pierced with spikes. Our Lord let **His** feet be made lame **in our stead** when they were nailed to the Cross ... no longer able to lift up His gasping body. **His** eyes were all but torn out – with that crown of thorns adorning His beaten, bleeding brow. Our loving God let **Himself** be hung with the millstone of **our** sins as He was cast into the depths of the sea of the Father's wrath against **our** iniquity. The Son suffered hell and the fire of God's punishment – in **our** place ... all **for us**.

And in this way we have been *salted with fire* – seasoned with the purging, purifying fire by which God makes us His saints. That's who we are in Christ. Now there are important connections to salt in Scripture – connections we may not readily recall. The first is that God had commanded

the Israelites to offer their sacrifices with salt: ***You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be lacking from your grain offerings; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.*** [LEV 2.13] In EZEKIEL God commands that also for the bull and ram ***the priests shall sprinkle salt on them and offer them up as a burnt offering to the LORD*** [43.24]. Then in NUMBERS we read that all of the tithes and offerings were given by God to the Levites, who serve in the Lord's House, saying: ***All the holy contributions that the people of Israel present to the LORD I give to you, and to your sons and daughters with you, as a perpetual due. It is a COVENANT OF SALT forever before the LORD for you and for your offspring with you.*** [18.19] Salt, then, seems to serve as a reminder that **God Himself** would preserve the covenant He first made with Abraham ... that through Abraham's offspring – singular ... pointing to Christ – God would bless ***all the families of the earth*** [GEN 12.3] ... providing once-for-all atonement for their sins **and ours** by the once-for-all sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross.

What does this mean for you? When God says: ***Have salt in yourselves,*** He is basically saying: *Simply remember the covenant I have made with you – believe it ... receive it ... in My Word and Sacraments. Recall always how I Myself have made the ultimate sacrifice for your sins upon the altar of the Cross – shaken and poured Myself out for you. You need do nothing else to atone for your sins – it is finished. Simply know this ... believe this ... and live in this covenant. It is in this covenant that you find peace – true, lasting, peace ... peace that begins here in this life and continues for eternal life. And all who are in this covenant by My grace are one – the one body of My Church ... which is My Own Body ... that I love and cherish and nourish. In Me, then, you may be at peace with one another. No need to strive for position in My Kingdom – you are all last ... and all first ... all equally given My forgiveness, life, and salvation. It matters not precisely how you serve Me and neighbor – as mother, father, daughter, son ... worker, supervisor, retired. Simply **Be Who You Are** in Me – be who I have made you and will keep you to be: My children, beloved and forgiven. Let not your flesh entice you to a contrary path or cause you to doubt. You are Mine ... My salt ... the salt of My covenant. Kneel with Me at the savory banquet of My forgiveness and life. And then watch Me shake you out to season this world with My mercy and forgiveness ... with My love and life.*

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]