

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I want to begin this morning by asking those gathered here to think of someone you just cannot stand or someone you despise. Maybe it's someone who has hurt you emotionally? I would like you to think of that person who you feel has harmed you in any way or has just really angered you. Now try to put your emotions, whatever they may be, aside. For those who feel so strongly and just cannot get past that anger, that's fine, hold on to it for now. I have to say that there are people like that in my life that I cannot get past my anger and resentment. And I'm sure there are people who feel that way about me also...that's fine, let's just sit in that for the time being and hold onto our feelings whatever they may be. And as you do listen again to the words that St. Paul uses to address the church in Rome and the church in Millersville:

¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection;...¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil...(excerpts from *Romans 12:10-17*)

Are you still thinking of that person or persons who you just can't stand? Good...now take a moment and say a brief but genuine prayer...pray that they NOT see things your way, but they like you and me see things as Christ would. Honestly and sincerely pray for that person, pray that God's goodness and grace would truly bless them this day. Pray that God would open your heart to understand that person better than you do now.

For those who still want to hold onto the anger, I'll bet there are very good and very valid reasons why you cannot pray for that person, you may even feel they do not deserve God's grace or forgiveness because of what they have done...to you.

There are historical people who always come up in discussions like this that we say are not deserving of God's grace and forgiveness because of what they have done in this life. Now, I could say get behind me Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things and I'm pretty sure you would understand this as you sit in that anger and resentment.

But today in our Gospel lesson we have this exchange between Jesus and Peter that we seem to have a hard time getting our minds around. Why does Jesus have to be so harsh to Peter? After all, Peter knows who Jesus is, he has made that glorious confession and has made it clear that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. We have heard about Peter's faith, he's gotten out of a boat while the wind and the waves were tossing the boat about...that doesn't stop Peter, he climbs out of the boat, onto the water, and walks toward Jesus...NOT away from Jesus, not beside Jesus, but toward Jesus. Peter loves Jesus, and we see that here today in the Gospel. Peter is simply wanting to protect Jesus from suffering at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes.

So why is Jesus calling him Satan or claiming Peter to be doing something satanic by simply saying he would not allow Jesus to suffer a horrible death on the cross? Jesus is saying to Peter "Get behind me Satan," for the very same reason Jesus would say it to us today in our hesitation or refusal to pray for our enemies. Jesus would more than likely say this to us because, we like Peter

see the Gospel and the Good News of Jesus Christ through our privilege or our context. We've heard it and we've said it, God may love and forgive you, but I don't...I can't. But here we sit, seeking the salvation and forgiveness that will be granted to us and to those we can't stand. Think about this, if we don't believe there is forgiveness for those we can't stand then we don't believe in forgiveness at all. Peter obviously cared about Jesus, but Peter sees only a theology of grace and glory that separates Jesus from the cross.

Any of us in Peter's position would do the same thing, we love the glory of Jesus Christ and would want to protect Jesus, but we, like Peter, are not denying ourselves, our feelings, our privilege, or our perspective...we too would want to protect Jesus because we cannot see the benefit of the death on the cross that frees all believers from sin and death...because we have judged some unworthy.

We all like Peter confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, we confess it every time we gather to worship, but in our resistance or our hesitation to pray for our enemies, it only shows us the very same thing Jesus shows Peter today, that we don't really see or fully understand what our confession really means. We don't see what it truly means to confess that Jesus is the Son of the Living God and that Jesus is the Messiah.

Through our feelings and our judgments, we in so many ways, jump out in front of Jesus when we say, God forbid that we should pray for our enemies...they don't deserve it or respect it. And in that we are no longer *FOLLOWING* Jesus, we are attempting to get Jesus to follow us and operate according to our privilege and our context. Today Peter shows what these words that Jesus is saying, really mean:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and *follow me*.”¹ (Matthew 16:24)

What is being said to us is that self-denial and *following* Jesus is submitting to God's will and NOT our understanding or our interpretation of God's will. In other words, the difficulty in praying for our enemies is a lesson in self-denial, it is following Jesus, and it is submitting to God's will. It is putting aside our cultural norms, the cultural voices that tell us how to love, who to love, and who to despise, the cultural norms that form our will and even our faith...is what we follow. Can we step away from those things and truly follow Jesus and stop trying to get Jesus to follow us and our ways and our thinking and feeling.

This death that Peter is attempting to stop is violent. And Peter is following every normal human emotion and instinct to stop his dear friend from becoming a victim of it. But Jesus is not a hapless victim, as Peter sees him. And I'm guessing that if we were not looking at this from our perspective, meaning, looking at it from our time and place, *right now* if we were there with Peter, we too would attempt the very same thing. We like Peter could not see that Jesus is a knowing and willing partner in this divine strategy that frees us all from sin and death and that equates a horribly violent death on a cross.

Something that is taking place and not so obvious in this exchange between Jesus and Peter is a shift in the meaning of the First Commandment to have no other gods. This we know to mean that

¹ “follow me” italicized for my emphasis.

that we are to fear, love, and trust God above all things. But this fear, love, and trust is not just something like our emotions we hold in our hearts and keep to ourselves. Fear, love, and trust are more than emotions, they become alive when we *follow* Jesus and not have Jesus follow our ways, our likes, and our dislikes as we go about our lives.

But this is nothing new and we are even in good company when we attempt to get Jesus to follow us. We want God to deny our enemies, we want God to discount those folks we judge as unworthy Christians because they don't do things the way we do, or they don't worship the way we do, they don't vote the way we do, love the way we do, or love those we love. John the Baptist had a hard time "following" Jesus earlier in this Gospel when Jesus approached John to be Baptized by him, we hear:

¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. (Matthew 3:14-15)

Or should I say, he followed Jesus.

Peter also would not let Jesus wash his feet and would later even deny knowing Jesus. Last week Jesus names Simon, Peter or Rock, and says that he will build his church upon that rock and this week the rock becomes a stumbling block to those who him instead of Jesus.

How many times have we thought better than Jesus in our judgments of others? How many times do we become stumbling blocks in our perception and understanding of Jesus and finding him following our interpretations rather than us following him? I am certain that I am unable to "follow" the way that this command from Jesus was intended. But in my feeble attempt to follow I am able to recognize that I cannot follow as I ought to follow. So, I carry in my heart a pocketful of passages from Holy Scripture that are most dear to me that remind me that when I can't follow I can listen once again to these beloved passages that speak to me. Today we have before us one of those passages. From the prophet Jeremiah we hear:

In your forbearance do not take me away; know that on your account I suffer insult. ¹⁶ Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. (Jeremiah 15:15-16)

Jeremiah in this first lesson today is addressing a people who are being led by and are giving into a sinful society rather than following what they know to be God. They have put their trust in earthly power and material things and this is what drives their minds and their hearts...this is what their hearts follow. Like us today who feed on and act upon the cultural influences that saturate who we think we are and who we really are. But today throughout our lessons, we hear words like forbearance, and instructions such as, let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor...be ardent in spirit, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, contribute...to needs...extend hospitality to strangers, bless those who persecute you...live in harmony with one another, do not be haughty, associate with the lowly...and finally, do not claim to be wiser than you are, rather deny yourself and follow the Lord. The Good News of Jesus Christ today is that, God's words are found and made known to us in this proclamation and in this Holy Eucharist...and so we eat them

and they become a joy simply by the sheer grace they give to us and that frees us all from sin and death. Through our faith in the Word that has fed us and nurtured us today, may we follow as he leads us to the glory and life in His glorious eternal kingdom.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.