

Lenten Service March 6, 2013

SEARCHING QUESTIONS OF LENT #4

“You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?”

On Sunday we heard some startling facts. Those professing “no religion” are rapidly gaining ground to a point where a quarter of the people are now professing such lack of faith. They believe that they have entered into the neutral zone. They believe that only “they”, are the true guardians of tolerance and peace. They are the worshippers of the god who has no name and has no creed. It is empty.

And in the emptiness of such souls we learned from Scripture that the demon temporarily evicted in the name of “Nothing” goes forth into the waterless places inviting 7 other demons worse than itself to inhabit the vacated space. And the state of that person is then left worse than it was at first.

I assure you that possessed souls such as these, tempt and harass the saints in every area of life and conversation. You aren't one of those anti-abortion people, are you? You aren't one of those homophobes seeking to deny my gay friend his constitutional right to marry, are you? You aren't one of those anti-science people seeking to deny evolution, are you? You aren't one of those Christians who are down on women, are you? You aren't one of those exclusively minded people who say that your God is the only way, truth and life, are you?

The questions are “Legion” but it could be summed up in the accusation directed at St. Peter: “You aren't one of those man's disciples, are you?”

As we learn from the reading from Mark, chapter 8, verse 38, whether we deny the words of Christ or the Word Incarnate Himself we can expect the same note of judgment:

“Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” Mark 8:38

The expectation to be faithful unto death is absolute. Jesus never lowered his standards, ever. Contrary to popular belief, the church's expectations of the Lord's disciples has not been lowered either. We still expect the confirmand whether 13 or 103 to make the same startling response to the question: Will you hold fast to this confession and church even suffering death rather than fall away from it? With the answer of the ages. *I do by the grace of God.*

In my manuscript for this evening I put, *I do by the grace of God* in bold italics. It is only by the *grace of God* that we persevere and without it we fail and we perish. Peter failed in living out his vow in John 13: “*I will lay down my life for your sake*” because he was the impetuous disciple, never counting the cost of what he was doing, never assessing

the reality of human weakness and without the kind of humility needed to call upon the strength of the Lord.

We might come to salvation by One Way alone but we come to failure by many different deficiencies. The result is all the same. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. When under the attack with barrage of questions there hasn't been a one of us who hasn't squirmed, looked for an open door, found refuge in ambiguous language or just outright flat denial of everything we hold sacred. We weak human beings! Despite having the love of God demonstrated in the offering up of the perfect Lamb of God, we want to be loved; we want to be affirmed and we want to be valued by our fellow sinful human beings. Therefore, in our human weakness and outright sinfulness we capitulate. We hear the cock crow in the morning whether we live in the country or not.

Thanks be to God. In the life of Peter the cycle of sin doesn't spin downward forever. He knows repentance. And he responds to the Holy Spirit who gives his heart the message. He is humbled. Truly, he is a changed man. Such opportunity is given to all of us. Just heed the Spirit as he performs His work. *To God be the Glory!* The work of the Holy Spirit, we learn, is to "convict the world of sin".

Jesus comes to him following His resurrection. He comes and asks Peter, "Do you love me?". Now it isn't just any sort of love. Jesus is asking with great expectations, "Do you love me with sacrificial love?" Now that must have hit hard. Peter knows he had failed in that. Lord You know that I *love* you. How broad is the English language! Peter is saying "You know that I love you with brotherly love". But he stops short of saying that he has sacrificial love. Perhaps he is stifled by his failures. Again the question is asked and the same response is given. Finally, our Lord condescends to Peter's level. Peter, do you love me as a brother? Yes Lord, he says.

Our Lord receives honesty and works with it. Peter is forgiven. He is re-instated. He is his called apostle to do great things.

We ought to remember that our Lord comes to us also in His holy Word and Sacraments. He desires to forgive us also. He desires to work great things amongst us also. We have the promise in John's Gospel. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed". He gives such as these hope that they may accomplish great things in his name.

In forgiveness, Peter certainly accomplishes great things. Jesus knows that Peter will grow in his love from friendship to sacrificial love. He foretells of his martyrdom.

Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep". Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you were you do not wish. This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me".

Peter's three-fold denial of Christ is met with our Lord's three-fold affirmation of love and forgiveness.

Indeed, we live in challenging times, where multitudes of voices will be asking in condescending tones: “You aren’t one of those man’s disciples, are you?”

If you quickly come to the conclusion that the burden is too much to bear, praise God. For when you are weak, then you are strong. Turn to the Lord and he will bear you up, to withstand the searching and even probing questions, even those of Lent.

Let us rise and pray for Steadfast Faith:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, because of Your tender love toward us sinners You have given us Your Son that, believing in Him, we might have everlasting life. Continue to grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may remain steadfast in this faith to the end and finally come to life everlasting; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.