

Jesus Our Life Perserver
Matthew 5:38-48
Sixth Sunday After Epiphany
February 12, 2023
Pastor John Klawiter, Preaching

Grace and peace to you my siblings in Christ,

On Monday, it was my chaplain day where I gather with all the Army National Guard Chaplains, as well as the Air National Guard chaplains.

February is the month that we remember the Four Chaplains (**SLIDE of Four chaplains**).

Two Protestant ministers, George Fox and Clark Poling, along with Catholic Priest John Washington and Rabbi Alexander Goode had attended chaplain school together and were deployed to Europe during World War II.

Each February, we hear what they did and why their actions are legendary.

It's a story that you wouldn't believe—you'd think it was exaggerated to be greater than it is, but the eyewitness accounts confirm that it actually happened like this.

During the early morning hours of February 3, 1943, the SS Dorchester was struck by a German torpedo off the coast of Newfoundland.

The ship was going down and soldiers were scrambling to get into lifeboats.

When the four chaplains reached the deck with their life jackets, it was mass chaos. Many soldiers were unprepared and didn't have their own life jackets with them.

Our instructor, Chaplain Colonel Dan Pulju recounted what happened next (**Picture of Pulju**)

Each of the chaplains removed their own lifejackets and gave it to other soldiers as they helped get them into the rescue boats.

As the ship sank, the four chaplains sang hymns and recited scripture—praising God while knowing that they would not survive the attack.

Only 230 of the 904 men aboard the ship survived.

This act of selfless-service is memorialized by the main building that chaplains currently attend school—where I'll spend 9 weeks this summer.

It was remembered on a US Postage Stamp.

It was a story of bravery and courage that inspired others during the final years of the war.

To hear Chaplain Pulju tell the story was a humbling reminder of the call to service that each of us chaplains take.

But he told us that as he was sharing the Four Chaplain account with someone the week prior, the person said, "I couldn't do it."

To be honest, how many of us would automatically, instinctively, give our life jacket to help someone else survive? It's not an easy decision, is it? To sacrifice one's life for a friend is one thing... but complete strangers?

Chaplain Pulju shared that part of his story to help put this in perspective.

It was the day after the Super Bowl, so he compared the preparation of the Four Chaplains to the ability to make the big play in the biggest game.

He said, "You don't just show up and make the big play, it's all the little things along the way that prepare you to do the big things."

He encouraged us, as chaplains, to consider why we gather for training and what are we doing to prepare for our call to service.

He said **"Our goal is to become the people who naturally do these big things."**

Where do we get our guidance to be people who naturally do these things?

To me, the answer is Christ. My God-given understanding of the love of God and my response to it. Even though, I know, that I mess this up all the time. I don't even do the little things right, so how could God trust me with the big things?

Today's story about Jesus being transfigured on the mountain is one of those big moments—one of those big plays in the big game.

But our reading starts with “six days later.”

Six days after WHAT?

Six days earlier, Jesus has a “come to Jesus” moment with his disciples. He tells them that he will be killed by the elders and chief priests and on the third day be raised.

Peter says “God forbid it, this must NEVER happen to you.”

To which Jesus says... what?

You're right, Peter, I don't want to do that. Thanks for suggesting this!

Is that what Jesus does?

No... Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan!

“You are setting your sights on human things, not divine things.”

Jesus knows what he must face. He knows the outcome.

What about Peter? He gets shredded by Jesus for his comment. Won't he be a little shy to offer up opinions in the future?

Not 6 days later. Not when Jesus, his friend and Savior, is transfigured—made to shine alongside Elijah and Moses on the mountaintop.

Peter chimes in “**Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.**”

Every Transfiguration Sunday, I think Jesus tells him off, rebukes him for this.

But as I read Matthew's account, he doesn't. Surely Mark or Luke depict an angry Jesus telling Peter to cut it out, right?

No, they don't either.

All Jesus, essentially, offers as coaching is “don't be afraid and don't tell anyone about this.”

Why does Peter want to build booths or tents on top of this mountain?

I've always assumed it's for selfish purposes—like, hey everyone, here's the picture of me on my fancy vacation! I've assume Peter wants the proof he's seen something awesome.

Pastor Jason Micheli (image of Pastor) thinks maybe we got it wrong, this time, when it comes to Peter.

Micheli says: Why doesn't Jesus scold Peter? “Peter, it's not about spiritual experiences, the Son of Man came to serve.”

If Peter's offer is such a grave temptation, then why doesn't Jesus exhort him like he just did six days ago and say: ‘Get behind me, Satan?’

If Peter is so wrong, then why doesn't Jesus respond by rebuking Peter?

In fact, here on the mountaintop, it's the only instance in any of the Gospels where Jesus doesn't respond at all to something someone has said to him. This is the only instance where Jesus doesn't respond.

I wonder: what if Jesus doesn't respond because, more or less, Peter's right?

Peter's right. It is right and good, always and everywhere, to worship and adore God became man, and, in seeing him, to see ourselves taken up into that same glory.

It is right and good, always and everywhere, to anticipate our flesh being remade into God's image so that we may be united with God.

It is good, for just as Christ's humanity is transfigured by glory without ceasing to be human so too will our humanity be called into union with God, to be deified, without our ceasing to be creatures.

I wonder, maybe I got it wrong, too.

What if, this is the moment in the big game where Peter makes the big play—he's handed over the lifejacket because he knows it's not about him, it's us, it's about sharing the good news with everyone else?

It's just the wrong time. Those bigger moments will come, for Peter. He shared the good news so that we could come to know Jesus. He did it. He helps us point to God today!

Each Sunday we gather, each day we focus on God, each moment in relation with our neighbor—these are the little things that build us up. This Lent, we focus on the little things, the rituals and the habits, to build up our spiritual strength.

God is calling us, in this mountaintop moment, to remember those little things. Provide selfless service, care for each other. Steward the world God made.

The cross is our life jacket... our life preserver... it provides eternal life. The cross saves us. One man sacrificed his life to save us all—now that is a big thing. Amen.