

Sermon for the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul – Matthew 16:13-19

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today another glorious feast has dawned upon us. Red paraments tell us that something is different about this particular day. You may recall that last time the altar was vested in red was earlier this month for the celebration of Pentecost, when we commemorated the coming of the Holy Spirit with tongues of fire upon the Apostles, so that all people would be blessed by the Lord's ministry through His sent ones. Then, red symbolized fire. Today, red symbolizes blood.

Today we praise our Lord for the 2 foremost of His martyrs, who were 2 great preachers of the Gospel and the chief princes among the Apostles whom Christ made sacred by His glorious death: the saints Peter and Paul. Tradition tells us that both remained faithful to the Christ, the Son of the Living God unto their own deaths, on this date, June 29th. Peter was said to have been crucified upside-down. Paul was likely beheaded, since this is the customary method of execution for Roman citizens. Much blood, indeed!

God gave us these men as powerful witnesses to the forgiveness of sins won only in Christ Jesus. And as bold preachers who were faithful even unto death, we also know that they were men. And men born into man's sinful nature, under the law. God gave us these men who were sinners (and great sinners at that!). Peter and Paul learned the darkest depths of their sinful condition, but also the deepest and infinite love of God's gracious forgiveness for them in Christ Jesus, a forgiveness that also spilled out of their lives as compassion for others. Those guilty of great faults forgiven by Jesus will easily pardon great faults inflicted upon them by others.

The apostle Peter committed a great sin – perhaps there has been no sin greater – in a brief conversation, he denied his association to the Lord at the time leading up to Christ's crucifixion. He denied Him 3 times! Yet, pardon followed from the Resurrected Savior with equal speed and ease, even restoring Peter to his apostleship earlier appointed. Paul, too, acted with unique and incomparable violence against the inmost heart of the infant Church by imprisoning her faithful and condoning their murder. Yet, even Paul was led to faith by the voice of the very Son of God and his baptism by Ananias. Though at one time a goblet completely full of evil, the Lord made Paul a chosen vessel, to bring Christ's name before the Gentiles, the kings, and the children of Israel. Christ made him a worthy vessel by His Own decree and qualified him by the forgiveness of sins Paul knew so well. Both Peter and Paul brought life to the dead and revived the dead in sin by God's Word alone.

Peter and Paul had their sins against God and their fellow man. But, you may recall, they even had strife with each other. Paul rebuked Peter and recounted this event in his letter to the churches of Galatia. Yes, Paul condemned Peter right to his face! At Antioch, Peter would eat with Gentiles, until the Jews came around, then he would distance himself from them. His hypocrisy even lead devout apostles like

Barnabas astray! Paul was quick to oppose Peter and recount this contentious incident. But Peter also had his mild retaliation against Paul. Peter gave a praise-filled putdown, a condemning compliment in his second catholic epistle: "And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction..." (2 Peter 3:15-16). 'O our beloved Paul! What wisdom he has! But ... well, he writes things that are hard to understand, so much so that even, ignorant and unstable people can easily twist them.' Peter could really deliver the 'nice-nasty.'

Maybe we haven't been murderous like Paul or denied the Lord like Peter. But sometimes we're like Paul, contentious and boastful about how we bested the ones who are wrong. The other times we're like Peter, hiding contempt between the lines of being "nice." Repent! The tongue is more deadly than the murdering sword, slaying others in just a few words.

Yet, remember also, dearly beloved, that the forgiveness that Jesus freely gave to Peter and Paul He gives the same to you as well. You're forgiven! You live! Sts. Peter and Paul are proof of that fact. To the foolish, Peter and Paul died gruesome deaths and that was all. But the eyes of the wise see that they are honored beyond measure. For the Lord who redeemed their bodies from sin, will also raise their bodies at the coming of Christ. Paul's words are prophetic of himself and Peter and us. "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, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

So we are dead to sin, but walk in newness of life. What does this new life look like? Christ teaches us this through His holy apostles. Not the fisherman's skill, which Peter had. Not the tentmaker's skill, which Paul had, but simply how to live. The man who is swollen with pride and boastfulness does not live. The man who defiles himself with lustful thoughts and actions does not live. The one who is infected with greed, and whose worth comes from fancy things is not living, but disfiguring his life and coming near to the gates of hell. To truly live is to endure evils and to do good, and to persevere in this until death. So live in an orderly way. Pay close attention to what you do and say, both in God's sight and your neighbors. Guard yourself from sin and your neighbor from scandal. Live to be loved and to love. Endure patiently with the moral and physical weaknesses of others. Live with humility so that when you have done these things, you may cast away all vanity when you're tempted to find your value in these good works. Find your goodness in Christ whose merit alone suffices to make you good, holy, and pleasing to the Father. Christ died for Peter. Christ died for Paul. Christ died for you. You're forgiven. You live. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠