

## **September 3**

Last Sunday's gospel is a bit of a mind-bender. Jesus tells his disciples what is ahead for him (suffering and death). Peter remonstrates with him and gets sworn at for his trouble! "God forbid what you say should happen to you!", says Peter, (a wish, a prayer, a word of encouragement, a suggestion—made on the quiet here away from the others—to take it easy on the suffering stuff). Jesus retorts in anger, "Get behind me, Satan!". What on earth?

Do you remember the devil's temptations for Jesus away back at the beginning of Matthew's gospel—make stones into bread, worship Satan and have power over the world, force God to save him from danger to show he is the messiah. Here is temptation #3 again, but in the mouth of Peter.

Of course, Peter is not channeling Satan and would rather eat dirt than do so. But he is, in the language of WWII days, a collaborator with the Devil's purpose—unwittingly but truly—because he has not taken in the lessons Jesus has been teaching from the prophets.

So, Peter THINKS he's being helpful and encouraging—a good thing, right? Not by doing this, in this situation, he isn't, because he's replaced the prophecy of Isaiah with the very ordinary and human wish for things to go well and work out for the best.

In actuality, Peter is unintentionally in danger of undermining Jesus' resolve to see his mission and ministry through to Golgotha. Peter is working against God's purpose in the ministry and passion of Jesus.

How serious is this? Very. Jesus gets really worked up about it. Remember, this is the guy who said even calling somebody a fool was a crime against the spirit of the Law. This scene gives us clear insight into how anxious, worried, torn, and uncertain Jesus was in the course of his journey to Jerusalem, how deep a spiritual struggle he had. Any time you or anyone you know thinks that Jesus just sailed through life until he had a bad Friday morning one time and then all was just great, remind yourself and others of this conversation. Jesus repels the guy who confessed his faith in him.

So let's be clear. On one level, Peter offers what appears to be a kind, even prayerful, thing. But it is absolutely the wrong thing to say. Is there something we can learn from this? I think so.

40 odd years ago I was a hospital chaplain. I learned many things doing that work. One of the most important lessons had to do with self-awareness and monitoring feelings and behavior in myself and others. What I came to understand is that people will respond to intense situations by doing or saying things that help them ease their stress and anxiety—which may involve deflecting or denying feelings (which is only minimal and temporary help). We will do a lot to maintain an illusion of control.

The lesson was to understand that it is better to feel and work with the feelings that are present, instead of suppressing them, in order to keep people connected with each other in their situation, and to make choices based in that awareness. Accepting one another's feelings is a god-send in the hard times especially.

We are often too quick to say, "Oh, you'll get over it" to a person dealing with a loss or a disappointment. We say, "buck up, things will get better", when someone is dejected. We say, "Plenty of fish in the sea" when an opportunity or relationship founders. But to whom are we speaking, in the end? It is so hard to just sit with someone who feels sadness, fear, loss and just be their companion in their moment. We don't want to feel as they do and it makes us uncomfortable that they do have those feelings. We'd prefer to avoid those emotions, or if facing them to hurry through them.

The true and helpful friend will not try to take the feelings away or hurry people along. The true and helpful friend will say, "Tell me more", and get down in the dirt with whatever is being wrestled with—even if it is just to be there while the feelings last.

So, sometimes, the natural, caring act of concern—seemingly doing the right thing for someone in trouble, being encouraging and saying hopeful things, and not leaving them to their own devices—is wrong. How and why? Because the ultimate beneficiary is meant to be ourselves. We don't like the drama, the difficult feelings. So we say we're trying to make the person feel better, we're

offering another perspective, but we're actually trying to make ourselves feel better.

Can we take this back to Peter in the gospel? Of course it is a good thing to encourage a friend who is having an emotional struggle. But as T. S. Eliot said in his great play, *Murder in the Cathedral*: "The last temptation is the greatest treason; to do the right deed for the wrong reason".

And if I may add an observation about us as a congregation, I'd like to say that the challenges we face now—including the rector search—are not to return St. Giles to what it was in some past time—even just last January. We need to be careful not to be locked into feelings and ideas focused on us returning to the way we were, but to rejoice in being who we are now and be open to what we can be in the future.