

## ***How to get people to listen***

The Rev. Dr. Peter B. Stube

St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA

September 15, 2024

17th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19, Year B

The Rev. Dr. Pe...: Let the words in my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh, Lord, our strength and Redeemer.

Everyone: Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Pe...: I grew up next to the altar of God in the Episcopal Church. An acolyte from my earliest memory, my father beside me at the altar. I heard the wonderful things in the Eucharistic prayer and here I offer myself, my soul, and my body for your service. And it sank deep into my psyche. When I was 13, my parents went to Indonesia to the mission field and I went to a prep school in North Carolina. My first experience as a Yankee and of southern religion, when I came there, I was forbidden to talk about the Episcopal Church. I'd also grown up as a neo-Pentecostal. We were in those heady days when the Holy Spirit was coming alive in the Episcopal Church, the late '50s, early '60s, and so that also was an important part of my spirituality. I was also forbidden during my years there to speak of the Holy Spirit.

So two really important parts of my formation were taken from me, but the one thing I continued to remember was I offer myself a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to you. In my first Bible class as a freshman, we had to memorize Daniel 1:8, which is Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself. And so I chose to be obedient what they had asked of me because I was confident that they loved Jesus as much as I did. And that there were things there that I could learn from them. And indeed during my years there, I learned how to pray. I learned how to discern in my morning daily devotion, the voice of God speaking. And I learned to love those who were in front of me, my classmates.

Got to say, some of them irritated me terribly. But what I've learned about the people that irritate me is usually they're hooking in me something that hurts. And so it's really important I've discovered to pay attention to the people that irritate me and to discern what it is in them that's hooking me because that gives me a window into understanding my own soul and own brokenness. The things that are hooked are pains that I haven't brought forward, that I haven't worked on with my Savior until he heals those wounds. And allows the woundedness to be a place of touching the lives of people I encounter for the rest of my life. You saw in James how important it is that we learn to speak words of grace to each other. To learn to speak the language of love so that we don't harm people that we encounter.

This, it seems to me, is also offering myself as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Interestingly enough, I was with three of my classmates a couple of weeks ago from high school. We're looking forward to our 55th anniversary of graduation, which makes me really old if you're doing the math. And we talked for four years about that experience and of our perceptions of each other, and it was a celebration of our love for each other and what we learned from each other in that time. One of them really did irritate me when I was there, but we're so far beyond that now. We're able to celebrate each other's gifts and strength, the wonder of what we offer each other.

The Gospel today looks at what Jesus requires of those who would follow him. This particular Gospel story comes eight chapters in halfway through the Gospel of Mark. Before this time, Jesus has not said one word about suffering or about his death or about resurrection, but that all changes today. All of those things come forward. He's asking them who they think he is to see what their preconceptions might be, what things need to be addressed in order for them to come to self-denial and to the way of the cross. And he discovers that they have some deeply seeded cultural understandings of what Messiah looks like and when he begins to talk about suffering, Peter takes him aside. Because in Peter's thinking, Messiah must be a strong man who can undo empires and set them free. But Jesus knows that the way forward is the way of death, the way of obedience and the way of the cross.

After he has rebuked Peter, he tells them that two things are necessary. And actually he has expanded the crowd because the people that he first addresses in this passage are only his disciples, but now he addresses the whole crowd that has now assembled around him. And he said, "Would you choose to follow me? Here's what it looks like. You'll deny yourself, your preconceptions, your prerogatives, your rights. You'll lay those aside in order to follow the way of the cross so that your actions may reflect the heart of God, the love of God for everyone that you encounter."

Jesus makes it very clear that this way of the cross may indeed be a way of deep suffering because we're going against cultural understandings of power and authority. We are most concerned as the Old Testament is for those on the margins, that we might bring healing. Revelation 22 says that the vision of God is that healing might to the peoples and to the nation. What we learn on the way of the cross is what's most important to God, the things that God values, things that God's vision seeks to grasp. So if we're going to follow him, it means laying aside those things, that while they're important to us, they may not be important to this moment in this relationship.

Do you understand what I'm saying? Here's some good news. At the end of four years at that prep school, I had somehow convinced them that it was possible to be both Episcopalian and Christian. So my siblings came to the school, all of them got to attend the Episcopal Church. And at the end of that time, they invited my father, the missionary doing significant work in Indonesia through

the power of the Holy Spirit to address the student body. So that you see, if we walk the way of the cross in a radical way, if we are attuned to what God wants us to do with what's in front of us with the people that are in front of us, it can so transform lives that they come to a new place and our relationships deepen in joy.

The church has understood that there are certain things that help us understand what's most important. The first is when we hurt someone, apology is necessary, or if we have harmed someone, repentance is necessary. No human relationship can go deeper unless we understand the importance of repentance and apology. Am I right? The second thing that the church teaches us is that forgiveness is necessary, and incidentally, I think that forgiveness may be more important for us than it is for the person we forgive. Because it takes those things which have hooked us and harmed us out, and they become attached to Jesus.

I'd like to say that repentance is... That repentance resolves deep hurts immediately, but in most cases, not so. It is the beginning of a faith journey in which we are being transformed for a lifetime to come to a place where we can actually think about the person that has harmed us with prayerfulness and grace. Just to give you an illustration of how long it may take, C. S. Lewis at 60, he dies at 63, finally can forgive and pray for a schoolmaster who abused him when he was a schoolboy. So it's taken him that long. I think that forgiveness may involve waking every morning and saying in our prayer closet as we pray in the morning.

Lord, I have forgiven, help my unbelief until such time as I'm transformed to a point of grace and mercy. Friend of mine created a song to give us wisdom as Christians to go forward, and maybe sometime I should teach it to you, "Teach us to speak the words of grace and teach my lips to speak the language of love." I used to have my congregations sing that with me before I preached. Because I found that to be a really critically important thing that this is a place. This church is a place where hopefully we are ministering grace to each other. Kindness, mercy, sometimes hard words. Jesus has to say hard words too. But we need to know our people deeply and know how to speak in words that communicate our love for them when we're speaking.

My Father used to say, "Peter, you can say hard words to me, and I don't realize what you've done until I'm driving away." That's kind of what we hope, is that our ability to speak to people will be with such grace and kindness that they'll be able to receive it and move it and not be defensive. This way of the cross will be a way of difficulty because it invites us to a different way of being, to a different way of paying attention to the world that we live in. We will be more attentive to the needs of those who are margins on the margins. We will, as Thomas Merton says, be willing to go live with the marginalized. Maybe not all of us, but some of us.

We will be willing to pay attention to people who know not Christ and allow them to come into our midst and to not force them to be like we are, but to introduce them to Jesus. That's the wonderful story in the gospel, that Jesus... They bring people to Jesus so that he can transform them. They don't tell them certain things that they need to know, like here's where you stand, here's where you kneel. But rather come to Jesus and you'll meet him here and he'll do the work of transformation. Jesus asks, "Who do you say Jesus is?"

And I think we answer that question by answering this one. Who do you say Jesus is, by the way you live your life? How has He worked himself deeply into your psyche so that you heal people near at hand? Because that is the vision that God has with the world. That peoples and nations may be healed through us, his church of people who are doing self-denial and carrying, I think not our cross so much as his cross to the world, that it might be transformed.

Now in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit.

Everyone: Amen.