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Pentecost 15

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“That Your Holy Spirit may Direct and Rule our Hearts”

There is no doubt in my mind that God calls us to a place other than where our nose leads us. That may sound strange to say but we do as Christians promise to be lead by that Holy Spirit of God into those places where others fear to tread.

The Gospel reading today is crucial to the ministry of Jesus. The disciples had been taught by Jesus for some time. They had witnessed the rejection of Jesus in his hometown. They had been sent out to preach repentance and heal illness. They were present when 5,000 were miraculously fed; yet they still had much to learn of what Jesus' Messiahship meant. Over the second half of his ministry they would become further acquainted with the sacrificial reality of his life.

We have been taught of this sacrificial reality at home and in church for a lifetime and it is less familiar to us than it was to the apostles for we live in a land of such plenty that sacrifice is no more than a word to anyone here. I read in my recent Rotarian magazine of a mother in the African

country of Niger who placed five leaves in a pot of boiling water and served the bitter soup from those leaves to her 5 children as their only sustenance for that day. Thousands are dying daily in that land as we deal with proportional giving and how we can balance the question of before or after taxes to our advantage. Yes, as Jesus had difficulty teaching ministry and the sacrificial life to his disciples so that hard work continues. But the Holy Spirit never stops guiding us in that direction in our daily lives.

This word is not to belittle our efforts to serve God but it is to make us look deeper into God's leading in our lives and know that He cares deeply for each of us and He gives us our lives of plenty that we might be generous to those who need us so. You and I carry a message of great hope in our Christian life but the message exacts a cost that few are willing to face.

The Church seems to be preoccupied with one subject these days but if that is your view of faith then you are missing the Holy Spirit's leading in your life. Isaiah and James take you to a different place this morning. Isaiah writes out of a period of a people in exile, a time when God had not been heard from in a long time. James writes out of a period of persecution and confusion in the early Church but each was lead by the Spirit to change their world in the Name of their God. Who calls you this day? Is it the world or is it the Savior who asked "*Who do you say that I am?*"

To show concern for the marginal in life is not a minor requirement of our faith. If we are the community of faith this is our first priority.

The Church is that community left us by Jesus to teach the world about God's ways and to make sure that ALL of God's children are loved. Most of our efforts in dealing with hunger are expended in discussion and implementation of programs or strategies.

The Holy Spirit leads us to feed the world. This challenge is a theological crisis for the Church as well as a political, social and economic crisis for the world. It was so in 50 AD and it is so today. Liberation theology is all about this subject. James writes *"If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?"* So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. It was Christians, those early followers of Christ, who were the first people ever called to care for the world in the name of God. Jesus never passed up a need. You and I are to do/be the same.

James places his emphasis on the necessity of practical righteousness in the Christian life. More than one biblical scholar concurs that the Letter of James is probably the earliest of the New Testament documents, around 50 AD. He draws on the ethical teachings of Jesus. The teaching of Jesus had

become the marrow of the early church. James never formally quotes Jesus because Jesus was so formally and foundationally soaked into his life and heart that he automatically reflects His Lord in all things.

The season of Pentecost is all about teaching us the ‘how’ of faith. We know all about the events of Jesus life but ‘How’ can we understand Jesus as ‘Messiah’ and what that is to mean for and to us?

Despite its paternalistic tone, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin presents a person, Tom, who makes the same choice as Jesus. Tom has helped two of Simon Legree’s slaves to escape. The vicious Legree knows this and has vowed to torture Tom until he reveals the whereabouts of the escapees.

Tom chooses to suffer and die rather than betraying others, and his faith in Christ empowers him to do so. Thus, through faith, Tom himself becomes an image of Jesus’ sacrificial nature: “Of old, there was One whose suffering changed an instrument of torture, degradation, and shame, into a symbol of glory, honor, and immortal life; and, where His spirit is, neither degrading stripes, nor blood, nor insults, can make the Christian’s last struggle less than glorious...” [from Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 1852]

As a culture, we Americans are not much enamored of bearing crosses. In fact, we go to great lengths to avoid cross-bearing.

When we have a little pain, we take a little pill to save us from discomfort. When we feel a little warm, we crank up the A/C. When we feel a little bored, we mix up a favorite beverage and turn on the TV or surf the Internet.

We work terribly hard to avoid bearing crosses and reading of the world's plight.

How then can we respond to Christ's call to pick up our crosses and shoulder them? How will we feed the world if there is no urgency? "*Who do you say that I am!*"

Often, it seems, we don't even know what a cross is, let alone have the courage and integrity to bear it. We need to have our eyes opened to the fact that following Jesus really does entail self=sacrifice and serving others.

These are not just words we say; they define things we must do. Where would we be right now if Jesus had said, "You know, you are right, Peter. That cross-bearing just is not for me!" or "Not today."

How will we respond to Jesus' call to pick up our own crosses and bear them? It all seems too extreme, too painful, too demanding.

But from another, higher level of understanding, we also fall upon Jesus' promise that "*my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*" The fact that -- in our identifying with Jesus --- he also identifies with us, saves the day.