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8/30/2020 - 13th Sunday after Pentecost-17 A
St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Exodus 3: 1-15; Psalm 105; Romans 12: 9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

**"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me." †**

'Take up your Cross...' These are fitting words for a week filled with turmoil— the storms on the Gulf Coast, the political conflicts in our country with the Republican/ Democratic Conventions, and the killing of unarmed Americans on our streets. A few weeks ago, I mentioned that God does not cause such calamities nor take sides in conflicts, yet God is always present with us, amid such suffering... incarnate in each of our lives, encouraging us, persuading us to grow. I firmly believe this. Today's Scriptures provide further details about what it means to live, as Christians, in our chaotic world; what it means to be followers of the way of Jesus Christ. Three things stand out in particular— *listening, sharing, and humility.*

The first, the importance of *listening*. I'm always amused by the Exodus story of the "burning bush," because it reveals the extent to which God went to in order to get Moses' attention, to get him to listen. Initially, there's this burning bush out there in the desert... but its not just on fire, it won't "burn-up" its just stays the same. And as if that's still not enough for Moses to take notice, the bush talks! It's clear that God wants to get Moses' attention, in order to get him to pursue the mission of delivering the Jewish nation out of bondage. And it's obvious that God listens, too, declaring, 'I have heard their cry...' God reassures Moses, when he doubts his ability, 'I will be with you...' if you *listen for me, as you are listening now*. Faith is more than a set of beliefs, it's a personal relationship with God. So, it's important for us to listen for God, to look for the ways God may choose to speak to us, call to us...whether directly, through other people, or through the beauty of nature that surrounds us. An important aspect of the Christian life is to listen for God and to listen to God. This may be what St. Paul means in Romans when he encourages us to "persevere in prayer." And we must also listen to each other, for we hear God most often through one another.

The second quality of Christian life that stands out in these readings is *sharing*. Sharing with one another involves mutually respecting and honoring one another. And in community, part of this involves naming. One of the greatest ways we honor someone is by sharing our name and by learning theirs. A name is more than identification, it's the beginning of intimacy. Some of us prefer a particular variant of our name. I prefer 'David' to 'Dave' because 'Dave' is somehow reserved for my most intimate relations; its what my mom called me, it's what my husband calls me. All of us have a name we call ourselves and by which we are known to others.

And we have a divine example in Exodus. Moses' relationship with God begins with his learning God's name. God tells him, "I am who I am," (in Hebrew, *YHWH*)... "I am who I am,"

God simply *is* and always has been. In learning and knowing God's name, we became God's people, and entered into special relationship with God. And, when we share our names, we enter into relationship with another; we live in and through others. By revealing our names and learning another's, we express that they are important and meaningful to us. It is then, once that relationship is established, our lives are forever changed.

Sharing with others— whether our names, our goods, or ourselves— is part of living that 'genuine love' that St Paul spoke of to the Romans, an essential part of Christian life.

And a third aspect of being Christian mentioned in the Scriptures, is a lot harder, *humility*. Last week we heard an earlier portion of Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus states Peter's declaration of faith is the 'rock' on which the Church would be built. In the Greek text, there is great word play between *Petros or petras*, various renditions of 'rock,' which culminate in today's passage. And Peter gets things completely wrong— the author of this gospel may be trying to indicate that Peter is rock-headed... a 'blockhead.' And Jesus rebuke of Peter is clear, 'if you want to be my follower, you must deny yourself.' Give up your ways and follow mine. Self-denial is not self-loathing, it's about following God's will instead of our own. That is, following the example of God incarnate — who 'emptied himself and took on our human condition' — we are called to self-emptying; letting go of all the stuff that doesn't matter and allowing God to fill our lives.

Paul pointed out to the Romans, evil is the only true enemy... and fear is the great manifestation of evil in our world. Fear evolves from selfishness, a desire to control and to be important. And as demonstrated by Jesus, love conquers fear and evil. We need only look back to what people have done for one another along the Gulf Coast this week and in our own community the past few months, to see that love conquers the most horrendous of evils. That's the theology of the Cross! It's what Jesus was trying to tell the rock-headed disciples. God defeats evil not by using force or evil in return, for God chose meekness, humility, and self-giving love. Jesus is the ultimate example, and he assures us, 'those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

Let us pray that we might all embrace these qualities of the Christian life and grow as followers of Christ. As we come forward to the altar this morning and as we move out into the world beyond this sanctuary— may we always *listen* to God and to one another, *share* our goods, our talents, and ourselves with others, and remain *humble* followers of Jesus, open to how God is moving around us. †