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AMDG

Proper 16A – August 27, 2017

Last week I ended my sermon by saying that Jesus came to reveal to us the face of God, which is perfect love. And, because God's pure love was revealed to us in human form, it is our face as well. Our unity with God, in whom we live and move and have our being, is the deepest sense of our salvation. It is the core of our existence. This unitive consciousness - the deep down awareness of one's unity with God. I believe is what Peter realized in today's Gospel story - he got it! Deep down! And Jesus knew he got it! "Blessed are you Simon Peter!" Then in saying, "flesh and blood didn't reveal this to you," Jesus was affirming that it wasn't Peter's intellect or hard work that brought him to this realization, but rather it was already there, deep in his heart, where God dwells; Peter just became aware. It was a great awakening on his part. And, Jesus used the opportunity to elaborate on what this meant for Peter.

Whenever I come across a passage in scripture where a major pronouncement is made, when there could be Cecil B DeMille cinemagraphics and music, I like to put myself in there, not just as an observer, but as the main character. It gives me deeper insight. Since Jesus came to reveal our true identities as beloved children of God then Jesus' story is our story, just as Moses' story is our story, Mary Magdalene's story is our story...and Peter's, too.

So, when Jesus says to Peter, "You're the rock on which the Church is built. Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven." he was talking to me...and to you, to each and every one of us. This passage reveals to us the power we hold within our deepest selves. The rock of God's salvation is embedded deep within us. We hold the keys. And, what we hold onto on earth is held onto in heaven. What we release on earth, is released in heaven. Wow! This is some pretty heavy stuff. You are the rock on which God builds his church, and death can never prevail against you. You hold the keys

to eternal life in your hands, and what you hold onto here, you hold onto forever. And, what you release, is released for all time.

But, this begs some important questions, - what is it that you would like to define the fullness of your life? If we take as the premise that heaven is not necessarily just a place, but a way life that begins here and now, what aspects of your life would you like to endure? and which part of your life would you rather leave behind?

From my personal perspective there are mindsets or attitudes that I'd certainly NOT like to follow me in my heavenly path - my resentments, my fears, my hatreds, my judgmentalism, my reluctance to forgive, my slowness to take action, my hesitation to be generous. It's not a pleasant list to consider.

The attitudes, mindsets and actions I would like to be bound to for eternity are taking joy in all of God's creation, readily caring for others, being quick to forgive, giving and serving without counting the cost, being swift to take positive action. And, while those are certainly characteristics that I aspire to, and sometimes exhibit, they hardly define my life on a continuous basis, I'm afraid. Heavy Sigh...

Jesus told us in many ways that our actions on earth were directly connected to our eternal destinies. Without overburdening you bible verse quotation, here are just a few...

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

"Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not steal. For where your treasure is, your heart will be also."

"I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me... Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

It's a painful concept to consider, but the extent to which we love the most unloveable people in our lives, to that extent do we experience

God's love and mercy. The things that hold us back from that love and mercy, we have to let go of. I wonder if Dickens got it right that the fears, obsessions, and resentments we forge in life are chained to us for eternity.

Peter being the archetype for each one of us doesn't seem so hopeful, after all does it? But, take heart. Because, of all the apostles, Jesus calls out Peter - Peter for all his missteps and blundering, with all his self-centered and self-seeking motives, who would deny Jesus and run away, who would try to shut out Gentiles who did not follow Jewish dietary laws. Why not the beloved John, or Jesus' brother James, or the first called, Andrew. It is this imperfect Peter that Jesus uses as an example of the power of the God-self within. It is Peter who is the Rock on which Christ's church is built. It is this deeply flawed fisherman who holds the keys. Another big Wow! What a great model for our spiritual journey. Peter is us. We get it...And then it slips away. One moment we're aware of our connection to God and all people...and then we judge the heck out of our neighbors. We realize the extravagant blessings God has showered upon us...but are reluctant to be generous with others. We tearfully accept God's love and mercy in our imperfect lives...but we can't bring ourselves to forgive others.

God gets it. He knows the lives we live. He knows the struggles we have with holding onto God's love and mercy, and releasing the things that hurt us. He lived it. He understands. And, holding up Peter as an example to us is God's way of showing us just how much he understands, accepts, and loves us, oh, so tenderly.

Sisters and brothers, God loved us and trusted us so much that he gave us the glory of eternal life, not in some distant future, but now! Heaven is not so much a place to be prepared for as a reality to be participated in. Hidden within the deepest recesses of our hearts is the key to that very fullness of life; it's the last place any of us would think to look, and yet it is the simplest place for all of us to access. Deep in that place is the source of God's love for us, and it's the source of our ability to extend that love to others. It is heaven. We aren't expected to be perfect, and we aren't expected to always understand. But, following the example of Peter, and with dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit, we can

persevere in resisting our false selves, and turn back to the God life to which we were called. May we always remember that our salvation is but a breath away, the love of God, of our neighbors, and of ourselves, beats quietly and firmly within our souls.