

**Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.**

**September 16, 2018 Pentecost XVII**

**Grace and Holy Trinity Church**

**Richmond, Virginia**

***Mark 8:27-38***

*Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

*Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

*He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”*

+ + +

What a week! We observed the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the terrorist attacks and airplane crashes in New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia on Tuesday. Our world has changed radically since 2001. It has affected many aspects of our lives, including what we have to do just to fly. And of course, we have been involved in a war in Afghanistan for 17 years...almost the longest war this country has ever fought, with no end in sight. Our politics around all of this, and around much else besides, are highly fractured.

Add to this, Hurricane Florence. A friend of mine posted an article that we really shouldn't use such nice names for hurricanes. Florence is a beautiful name. I mean, it comes from the Latin word, meaning "to bloom." It is about flowers for heaven's sake. We should choose better names, like the names of ancient despots, Hurricane Sennacharib, or Ashurbanipal. At any rate, the states just south of us, and Virginia to some degree as well, have been humbled and ravaged.

I lived through Hurricane Floyd when I was in North Carolina serving as rector of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Rocky Mount, NC. There were twenty three families in the congregation whose homes were flooded. Many of them up to the crown molding.

One story of a parishioner that has stuck with me, was of a woman in her 80s. She was in bed asleep when her cat woke her up to let her know that things weren't right. She stood up and the water was above her knees. She grabbed the cat and starting wading to the kitchen. The cat freaked out, plunged into the water, knocking the flashlight out of her hand, and disappeared. In the darkness she made her way to the kitchen and climbed up on the counter and sat there as the water rose, waiting to be rescued. Sure enough, after a while, there was a knock at the door. Rescue personnel were there in a john boat... the water currents inside her home at that point were too much for her to walk through so she called and when they heard her respond, they broke the door down and came in to get her. She insisted they needed to get the cat too...but he was no where to be seen...so off they went. She was relieved to be safe but devastated at the loss of her cat, who had woken her up and warned her of the danger. The house filled up to the crown molding.

And three days later, when the water subsided she went back. And...the cat was alive...it was in the valance, apparently kept its nose in the air pocket. So the cat survived! A happy reunion. It was a long time before the cat was normal again...just saying.

At any rate, I know there are countless stories about people out there right now and that this is a tremendously difficult time. In light of all this, what a blessing it is to be in church.

You know, after 9/11 church attendance went up. One sociologist has reported, “People thought this type of crisis of national significance would lead people to be more religious, and it did...But it was very short-lived. There was a blip in church attendance and then it went back to normal.” And it turns out that normal, was a decline. The trend was very slow, so it was hard to detect. America’s overall participation in religious activities was actually in decline in 2001 and had been since at least the 1970s.<sup>1</sup>

After natural disasters, or attacks, after trauma, it is not unusual to see people turning to church. It is hard to say exactly what drives that. The consultant for our capital campaign said that people used to come to church seeking God and they found community as well. Now, many people come seeking community, and find God. Regardless, that is a pretty good picture of what church is about...community and God. And that is a comfort, for sure.

Just this past Tuesday night, I was here with Circles RVA which is the community anti-poverty effort which meets here and is supported by GHTC as part of our strategic plan...and these two students, completely separate from the program going on, came in and asked, “Can we go into the church and pray for a while?”

Now, I certainly did not want to meet Jesus on the Great Last Day and have him say to me, “What was wrong with you? They just wanted to pray and you told them no.” So, I worked it out so that the people there who were responsible for locking up would check the church and make sure the alarm wasn’t set on them, and off they went.

I have no idea what they were praying about, but they were drawn to this holy space—they could have prayed anywhere, but were drawn to the church...and that space was here, that sanctuary was here, because there are people who make that possible. Whether there are lots of people or just a few in the space, there

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://today.duke.edu/2016/08/after-911-short-lived-rush-church>

are people who make sure this place exists as a focus for community, service, and prayer to God. It is the steady on people who make if possible.

It is good that the church can be present to people in this way, and in times like these. And it is even better that there are people like you, steady on, committed people who choose to make regular attendance a priority and regular support...week in and week out, an important expression of faith.

It may be that people don't stick around because as it turns out, church is not easy. Yes, of course, in a crisis it is...and should be...a comfort. But the church is not just about comfort. It is also about challenge.

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." These are not easy or crowd pleasing words. The truth that Jesus preaches rarely is easy.

But discipleship is about sticking it out. Just take a look at Teresa of Calcutta. When she was alive, it was easy, both on the basis of what she said publicly and the kinds of things she was doing, to think she was happy and fully in touch with God.

Turns out, not so much. She directed that her personal documents and letters be destroyed at her death but she got overruled and a posthumous book was published. And her letters reveal that for decades, she struggled with deep and abiding spiritual pain, and that she had no sense of God's presence whatsoever. She figured out a way to live with the darkness and she never abandoned her belief or her work.<sup>2</sup>

I remember the book that revealed her struggle came out as my mother was dying and naturally enough, my mother had her moments of doubt... She said, "What if it is all not true?" ...but she also said, "Isn't it wonderful? Mother Teresa too!"

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://time.com/4126238/mother-teresas-crisis-of-faith/>

Love is not simply a feeling , but a decision. Faith is not based only on emotion, but is an act of will. This is the way it is.

In the Fourth Gospel, and in relation to another challenging teaching of Jesus, we read: “Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it...many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.’”

So here we are this morning. In the midst of world filled with war, and poverty, and problems. In a world where hurricanes can devastate huge numbers of people. In a world, let us never forget, filled also with beauty, with acts of heroism and sacrifice, a world of simple joys and satisfaction...

Here we are, in community, and in God’s presence...blessed in this moment. Blessed to be together. And that is why we hang in there...in the floods and in the droughts, we meet God here together. After all, to whom can we turn except to the one who has the words of life. And together with God, we face each and every day, with faith, grit, and gratitude. Amen.