

20 Pentecost
Mark 10:2-16

My sisters and brothers in Christ,

In the sport of running (Chicago Marathon today), and in bicycling too, there is a moment when you hit the wall. Not literally, of course. But figuratively, when your energy flags, when you can hardly take another step, or pedal another five yards. Your body says: okay you fool. That's enough. I'm not going another step, not another turn of the wheel. Finished. Shutting down.

This might be somewhat similar to how the desert fathers of the first centuries of Christianity must have felt at times. They had lived in the desert, often as solitaries. They had chosen to do this to deal with their demons. To struggle with them, and hopefully to beat them back and into submission. But there must have come the moment when the task seemed so great that even the thought of beating them back was beyond reach – and even thinking about a draw was worse than defeat itself.

But the resolution, the answer, when you hit the wall, when the demons seem to be getting the upper hand, when continuing seems an utterly foolish option – the answer is to continue, to go forward, to struggle, to stick it out, a few more paces, a few more yards, more time in the desert – until everything is natural again. Until, like Job, you feel God's hand on you and his words touch you.

It is not the defeat of the opposition that you seek, it is not the crushing of the forces against you – it is the assurance that God is with you and you have been redeemed. You have been called by name, set aside, and anointed. And how apt is Psalm 26 this morning: “Give judgment for me, O Lord, for I have lived with integrity; I have trusted in the Lord and have not faltered.... I have walked faithfully with you.”

What matters is this: persistence in the face of obstacles, faith in the face of uncertainty. Look at the words in Psalm 26 that describe the opposition: deceitful, worthless, evildoers, the wicked, sinners, those who thirst for blood, the bribers. The list could go on.

We live in a broken world, and it is for us, as children of God, to seek the paths of integrity, to walk in faith, to give thanks for God's wonderful deeds, and for God's love. It is a struggle – no one ever said it was going to be easy. No one can point to scripture that says the task is a lark. But we have inherited the patience, the trust, and the faith of Job.

We are not God, but we have been minted in God's image, and we are called to decide how we want to spend ourselves – how we want to spend our lives. Recall the words that God commanded Moses to speak to his people. We find them in Deuteronomy: set before you are life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life. And so we choose life, often in the midst of the tyranny of terrible temptations. We choose the good, not necessarily because we personally are going to benefit. We choose the good because it is the correct and Godly thing to do. We choose what is right and just, not what is expedient. We choose what is right and just because it makes for a better community of grace. Altruism is God's beneficial hand upon our judgment. Indeed, you could say that the Bible is the story of God trying to reclaim humanity and bring us back home.

One of the recurring themes in the Bible is the conflict between the sacred and the secular – the tension that all of us live in by virtue of being created human in God's image and yet having to live

in a broken and sinful world that is of human construct. We are tempted and tested at every turn. And yet we are loved and cherished by God's hand at every turn.

Often, being *in* the world leads us to be *of* the world, even when we don't suspect it. Jesus repeatedly brings this up in his teachings. For example, take the reading for Ash Wednesday in Matthew's Gospel (chap. 6). Jesus tells us that what we do, whether practicing piety, giving alms, praying, fasting – what we do should not be done so that others can see us and praise us or think highly of us. Yes, you get a reward that way, but it won't be from your Father in heaven. You get a worldly reward, but not a sacred one.

Or take the teaching of Jesus about the resurrection and what it is. The same story appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke – the story about the seven brothers. The first brother married a woman and then died; then the second brother married her and eventually died; and then the third did the same thing – and so on for all seven brothers. The Sadducees asked Jesus: "In the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be, for all the seven had married her?" Jesus answered, essentially saying that human relations are one thing, but the resurrection is heavenly and sacred, and exists on a different level in which humans are resurrected as angels in heaven, and not as mortals that marry. The secular world is not the sacred world. The body is not the soul.

We still are trying to work ourselves into living sacredly in a secular world. This is not easy. Success is not guaranteed. And, anyway, how does one measure success. Could it be that "success" is precisely the word we seek to avoid, seek to ignore. "Success" may be a secular model. Does that mean we in our quest are caught in an unsolvable problem? Perhaps the concept of success is not relevant to a sacred view of life and existence. If we are spiritually comforted, does that mean success? Success is secular language. Could it be that "faithful" is what we strive to achieve – faithful, a daily goal, a daily task, in which we participate. Faithful, to go beyond what it means to hit the wall. To continue when the odds say otherwise. But who pays attention to the odds when we open our hearts and souls and pray to God. ❖