

Pentecost 14 - Matthew 16:21-28

No matter how old I get, or how far removed from “back to school” (and believe me, I am *very* far removed from “back to school”), Labour Day weekend always marks for me an end and a beginning. Throughout our whole country, the first weekend on September marks a “hinge,” even, to use contemporary imagery, a “pivot.”

Even though we all may say, somewhat wistfully to each other, that September can be such a beautiful month and even though we know that, sometimes, some of our best “summer” weather takes place in September and October, Labour Day inevitably marks, for most of us, the end of summer and the beginning of fall. A new school year debuts for our children and grandchildren. Nervousness, excitement, a little fear, some optimism surround those in our families and circles of friends who are about to “plunge.” Even some of our older friends maybe going to or returning to “higher” education. For some, September may mean a new job or a new position. For us all, it means a—in lots of cases—welcomed return to “routine”—to a more regular rhythm, a greater degree of predictability. Of course, it also comes with a change of seasons—cooler evenings, the promise (or threat, depending.....) of fall and winter making their way towards us.

In the midst of that pivot, as in all times of change, it provides us with an opportunity to reflect, to think, to plan, to look both backwards and forward.

Looking forward is an important part of our lives—always.

Looking back is also important and, sometimes, sobering. This has been an extremely difficult and painful summer for our country—the crushing reality (as if we needed reminding) that the climate crisis is real and urgent and is not just coming—it is, as we have known for so long—HERE! We have been overwhelmed by news of fires and floods, of destructive winds and weather systems which we cannot begin to understand or accept. We have watched our friends and neighbours having to leave their homes and communities and we are suffused with helplessness in the face of all of this, with deep admiration for those who work on the front lines, and with earnest prayer for all those who have lost homes, livelihoods, and in so many cases, their lives.

In the midst of despair, there is always, for those of us who follow Jesus, the hope of the Gospel—the good news that sustains and strengthens us, even when we sometimes think that we are beyond being strengthened or sustained.

In today's Gospel reading, as we continue to walk through Matthew's telling of the story, we are reminded of the humility that comes with faith, of the denial of self-service, of the strength of obedience and of the joy of, indeed, taking up our cross and following Jesus to glory.

Jesus is with his friends, particularly with Peter, who has gone through his conversation about who Jesus is, Jesus reminding them that he is to go to Jerusalem; to suffer and to die; Jesus tells them that, unless they take up their cross and deny themselves, they cannot be one of his disciples. Jesus says the same thing to us.

So, what does it mean in 2023 in a sophisticated and blessed place like Canada. It does not mean that we can simply presume that, because of our discipleship, everything will suddenly be wonderful!

It does not mean that we can simply turn our collected backs on the climate crisis, on the scourge of homelessness, or the shame of widespread poverty and inequality, on the crushing reality of children who will go back to school hungry and ill housed.

It does not mean that we can cover ourselves in the glory of our faith and ignore our political and social responsibilities as citizens and as Christians.

It does mean, I think, that as disciples of Jesus, we are people who live with unquenchable hope and not as people of despair.

It does mean that, as people of hope, we are reminded about the power of our humility to be agents of change.

It does mean, I believe, that the ways we live and “have our being” as parents and friends, as co-workers, as partners and spouses are always cast in the light of making a difference.

There is always a better way—saying no to despair and yes to hope and promise. There are always important ways in which we can work together, socially and politically, for positive change in our communities and our nation. The discipleship to which we are called compels us to be more welcoming, more accepting, more open to the wondrous breadth of God’s kingdom.

Because of what God has done for us, we know that we carry the promise of good news and of hope to a world which can seem, at times, to be careening out of control. The strength of our faith and our determination can and does make a difference!

As we pivot from summer into fall, we can reposition ourselves into difference makers—not because we know that we are going suddenly to make everything right, but because we know what a difference we have made and can make!

Our prayer needs to be that, together, we can be the church, can be effective disciples, and can spread the Good News of Christ!

May it be so ...for you, for me, and for our Church. Thanks be to God! Amen. Alleluia!