

## Proper 7, Pentecost IV June 22, 2008

Remember those old stories about Japanese soldiers on tiny Pacific islands who had hidden up in the mountains and jungles for decades, still fighting a war that had been over for a long, long time? The image of doing that, of holding out, alone, miserable, isolated, and wrong, for the sake of a conflict long resolved, is a powerful one, and there is something about it that rings true.

Too often, those soldiers personify what it's like to be a human being—hiding out from some vaguely remembered enemy, being very careful, keeping everything secret—the solitary combatant in a puzzling and almost-forgotten conflict, living at great distance from peace and from community. The human situation can be like that.

This is what Paul is talking about in much of the Book of Romans, and very clearly in the little section we just heard. Paul is saying that we live like those soldiers because by nature we are at a distance from all that matters; because being human means carrying wounds—both old and new, ancient and recent, universal and personal. And Paul is saying that the war is over—that the distance that has separated us—that has separated us from ourselves and from one another and that has, most centrally, separated us from God, this distance has been closed. So the wounds that somehow go right to the core of our existence and of our history, the wounds that isolates us and put us out there all by ourselves, these wounds have been healed. The war is over. We won.

Actually, Jesus won it for us, and we need to remember that. But it *is* over. So, there is really no point in staying up in the mountains or out in the jungle—or whatever hiding out may look like in our particular case.

There is really no point in fighting that particular fight—the fight that keeps us out there and on guard. Instead, the Lord calls us to Himself. The free gift of the one man Jesus Christ leads to life for all. We can come out of the jungle.

That's good news, in fact, that is *The Good News*. This is what we believe; this is what the Christian faith proclaims; this is what we are here this morning to celebrate. The war is over. We can come home

But this isn't always easy to see. Real life isn't always filled with victory parades. Jesus deals with this in a fascinating way in today's Gospel. He is still sending out the disciples (next week we finally finish up this long and exhausting list of marching orders). As Jesus sends them out, (as he sends us out), he talks about problems, and conflicts, and persecution and dangers. He promises the disciples that they will have plenty of these to deal with. Things will be difficult. Faithfulness to him will cut very deep, and very close to home.

Now, on the one hand this is troubling. The prosperity gospel, the idea that since God cares for us we should expect to get pretty much what we want, has always sold well in this part of the world. So we tend to see a close connection between God's approval and our own success. Because of its dramatic contrast to that notion, Jesus' absolute promise that, in one way or another, what it means to be favored by God and faithful to God will include problems, persecutions and pain, seems somehow almost un-American. But there it is. There is no avoiding it.

On the other hand, while we may find these words difficult in theory, what Jesus is saying is not really news at all. It certainly wasn't news to Hagar, consigned to the ash heap by a jealous Sarah and made to live on the extreme fringes of society.

And it's not news to us. Somehow, the way the world is guarantees that both human life generally, and the journey with God particularly, will be at times difficult, ambiguous and painful.

In fact, every world religion agrees with Jesus on this one. Not only Hagar, but Confucius, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and just about everyone who has ever looked around with open eyes has said, in one way or another, "life is hard". That's really not news. It's a struggle, but it's not news. "Man is born to trouble as the smoke flies upward."

Among other things, this means that very often it neither looks nor feels like the war is over. It very often looks and feels like the soldiers up in the mountains and jungles might have a pretty good idea. That's the tension. Paul proclaims victory; Jesus, Hagar, and just about everybody else, say that life is hard. Today we listen to the Lord put all of this together in a special way, a way we need to hear.

First of all, Jesus doesn't deny the grim realities; he doesn't say that we will really end up getting what we want after all. Instead, one more time, and still unexpectedly, Jesus says, do not be afraid—in fact, he says that three times in six verses. Now, Jesus says this, not because the stuff out there isn't real, not because it doesn't matter, but because there is something greater going on. Jesus insists both that the greatest power in creation is not the destructive power we so often see; and that the most important things that can happen, the best things that can happen, are already happening. Don't worry about what the world can do to you, because what God is doing in you and in the world is much more important than anything the world can do to you. As real, and as dreadful, as some of that may be, there is something greater. So do not be afraid.

Do not fear those who can kill only the body—not because the body doesn’t matter, but because it is not ultimate and there are greater things. | | Don’t worry about the things that happen to sparrows, not because these things won’t happen to you—but because there is something greater going on. Do not be afraid, because being afraid will blind you to the deeper, and the stronger, realities that are also happening,

Here is a story about this. It is a very encouraging story, but you have to dig for a bit to find the encouraging part. About the year 200 AD one of the finest theologians of the day, (and of most days, for that matter) a man named Tertullian, was approached by a fellow citizen who was preparing for Baptism.

They both lived in Carthage, a prosperous Roman city in Northern Africa. This was a time when Christianity was often seen as a threat to the overall good of the society; and Christians were publicly ridiculed and occasionally persecuted.

Tertullian’s friend was concerned. He wanted to be both a faithful Christian and a successful Carthaginian. He knew that he was to be completely loyal to Christ; but there was a very real conflict between the way he was making a living and the demands of that loyalty. (There were a lot of perfectly respectable jobs that Christians were not allowed to have back when the Emperors were still Pagan—things like goldsmiths, who made idols, officials at the public games, and many more. This fellow had one of these—nothing scandalous, just prohibited by the Church.)

So, he went looking for some theological help in the arranging of a reasonable compromise. He explained his situation in great detail and doubtless with some potent arguments; then he summarized his predicament by asking the killer question, the one that he was sure would guarantee him some relief.

He said: "What can I do, I must live?" And Tertullian looked at him for a long time and replied, softly, "Must you?"

Persecutions, challenges, tough choices, these will come, and the good news is that these are not ultimate. There is something greater going on. So do not be afraid.

The war is over and we won. Actually Jesus won it for us. Nothing else is as important as this.