

Proper 20, Year B  
September 20, 2009  
St. Ann's, Old Lyme

I offer these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

From time to time, I will have the opportunity to watch – for the bajillionth time, on of my all-time favorite movies, *The Sound of Music*. I'm a total sucker for a good love story, and I wax emotional as Julie Andrews wins the heart first, of seven adorable children, and then of the dapper Captain von Trapp.

More often than not, however, I turn off the movie right after the wedding scene. Even though I know that everything turns out wonderfully - eventually - I don't seem to have the emotional stamina to see the story all the way through – to watch the agonies that the Von Trapps have to endure as they escape Austria. Basically what I do is turn a deaf ear to what I don't choose to hear. The thinking goes something like this: if I refuse to acknowledge what might be unpleasant, maybe it won't happen.

I think the current term for that kind of behavior is 'denial'. And I also think that I'm not all that different than the disciples as Mark described them in today's Gospel.

When Jesus told the disciples that he would be killed and would rise after three days, they didn't understand what he meant. Nor did they ask what he meant. The Gospel says that they were afraid to ask. What the disciples wanted was a victorious, conquering Savior, and that wasn't what Jesus was describing – at least not to their ears.

So they turned a deaf ear to what they didn't choose to hear, or want to face. Sure sounds like denial to me. To be fair, their denial was born of fear – a fear that is certainly understandable. But because of that fear, they refused to accept Jesus as he was, and thus cut themselves off from knowing him as completely as possible. Well, we are probably just as fearful as those disciples about accepting Christ as he is, and in the fullness of who He is. We too have our ways of turning a deaf ear to what we don't want to know.

One mechanism we use is known in scholarly circles as a ‘canon within the canon’. Using that mechanism, we appropriate from Holy Scripture only what we want to hear and dismiss what doesn’t seem to fit our notions of who Jesus is or who God is.

For example – and perhaps not surprisingly – I’m not wild about those passage in Holy Scripture that suggest that women should be silent in church. Like those first disciples, I’m not sure I fully understand what is actually meant, and I’m scared to ask, because I might not like what I hear.

But just as the crucifixion – which the disciples didn’t want to face – is part of our sacred story, those passages about women are also part of the canon of Holy Scripture, all of which we understand as some sort of revelation from God about God.

And when we dismiss certain passages without even trying to grapple with them, we too shut ourselves off from knowing God in Christ as fully as possible. The first disciples acted out their denial by fighting among themselves. They got defensive and argumentative, debating the peripheral issue of which of them was the greatest, and ignored the central issue of the greatness of the One who stood among them.

In our denial mode, we too become what the Letter of James describes as bitter envy and selfish ambition, and indeed, there is fighting among us human beings. We preoccupy ourselves debating peripheral issues – devising evil schemes, as Jeremiah puts it - often to the exclusion off our central task of being disciples and spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. And, also to our shame, we often forget the ‘little children’ that Jesus would have us receive in his name. When we turn our dear ear to knowing Christ as completely as possible, we separate ourselves not only from him, but also from God’s little children, and from each other.

But it is together that we are called. It is together that we can receive and know most fully, who Christ is and who God is. It is together that we are the Body of Christ. We may well be drawn to the Body as individuals – one because of the liturgy, another to study theology and scripture, yet another to labor on behalf of the poor and needy, and still another to find refreshment in Christian fellowship.

But when we come together, the richness of our liturgy is enhanced as many bring their talents when we gather here. And undoubtedly, our combined understanding of doctrine or the Bible is fully than any one individual ever has. And without question, our efforts on behalf of the 'little children' have more impact when we join forces.

It is also within the Body of Christ that we can abandon contentious and divisive behavior, because it is here that we can feel safe enough to risk being last of all and servant of all and to receive God's little children in Christ's name. And it is here that we can shed our denial mode and face what we might otherwise not choose to hear, as we explore – as fully as we can – who Christ is and who God is.

When I turn off the television halfway through *The Sound of Music*, I do miss the painful parts of the movie, but I also give up the very best parts, too. When the disciples declined to ask Jesus what he meant when he said he would be killed, they missed the best part, too, because they failed to hear that Jesus also said that he would rise after three days.

Jesus (unlike us, often) was willing to see the story through to the end. He died to conquer our denial and fear and divisiveness. And he rose again, so that as one body, we might know as fully as possible who he is and who God is. He died and rose again so that we might know that at the end of the story we are received into his loving arms as beloved little children.

Thanks be to God, and the one who died and rose again. Amen.

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