

The Way Now and Forever.

Last week, I talked a bit about the tension between being and becoming for people of faith. I identified being as the realm of surrender and embrace; the realm which finds us resting and trusting in God's call upon our lives; the realm in which we are who God has equipped and empowered us to be. Becoming was something altogether different. As opposed to being, becoming is the realm of rebellion and revolt; the realm in which we set off to become someone other than the person God has made us to be. In a little while, I'll expand this understanding of being and becoming a bit. But for now, let's take a look at how today's collection of readings continues to bear witness to the tension between being and becoming for people of faith.

Start with our reading from John. Last week, Jesus demonstrated it was mighty special to be the person he had been sent into the world to be by satisfying the deepest hungers of a throng of humanity with just five loaves and two fish. Today we learn more about how special it is for Jesus to be who he's supposed to be through what he says. When Jesus embraces God's mission for his life, he gives a food that endures unto eternity. When Jesus is the person God has sent him into the world to be, he forever eliminates hunger and thirst for those who come to him. Being definitely beats becoming not just for Jesus, but also for his Church and the world God loves. But like last week, Jesus is given another temptation to become rather than to be today.

Last week, the crowd he satisfied with five loaves and two fish wanted Jesus to become their king rather than to be God's Bread of Life. This week the same people want Jesus to become the one who does the signs they desire rather than to be the sign he has already been and continues to be at God's behest. Within the recorded history of Jesus Christ, you just can't escape this tension between becoming the Savior the world desires and being the Savior God knows the world actually needs. Jesus' entire life history is one long episode of the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before his death. Is it going to be, "Abba, Father, your will, not mine" or "Abba, Father, thanks for the memories and the good start to life, but it's going to be my will not yours?" It's a tension, the tension between being and becoming, that we ourselves cannot escape as people of faith.

Last week, I said we share a God-given calling to be those who build up the Body of Christ. I also said God will enable us to be the people we need to be to fulfill this mission. And that should we be in doubt about who God would have us be in real time and space, we need but pray, "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand." Well, guess what? Our reading from Ephesians affirms pretty much all of this today.

We're told that God needs each of us to be different people; some apostles; some prophets; some evangelists; some pastors; some teachers; some not specified by title or name. We're also told that Christ gifts us to be all of these different people. And then, we're told that the whole point of us being the different people Christ gifts us to be is to build up the Body of Christ for ministries of love; with each of us making our own essential contribution to that mission when we find the courage to just be; to just be the individuals God has made us

to be. But maybe, maybe prayer won't always enable us to discern who each of us is to be in real time and space. If so, today's reading from Ephesians identifies another method of discernment.

Last week, I couldn't help but notice that my story about my mother singing "Precious Lord, take my hand" as she was on her way to widowhood touched a lot of hearts. Your eyes, and the tears that were sometimes in them, spoke volumes. But as wise and faithful as my mother was when she turned to our Lord for direction at a key and pivotal moment in her life, the truth is that God's response to our prayers isn't always instantaneous or perhaps it's that our discernment of God's response isn't always instantaneous. When such gaps in communication and/or comprehension occur, we're going to need some other way to discover who God would have us be in real time and space. Our reading from Ephesians identifies this alternative or amendment to prayer when it twice says the aim of all ministry is to make people more like Christ. When in doubt, the reading says, do as Jesus would do.

If you missed this point of emphasis earlier, it's there on at least three occasions. First, we're told Christ descended into our lives and then ascended far above all the heavens so that he might fill all things, including every one of us. Then we're told the goal we're to keep in sight as we're building up the Body of Christ is for everyone to rise up towards the full stature of Christ. And then just for good measure, we're also told that we all must grow in every way into Christ. This sure sounds to me as if doing as Christ would do will prove to be a pretty foolproof strategy when prayer does not quell or erase doubts about who God would have us be in real time and space. When Christ is the goal of all ministry, as he is in our reading from Ephesians, he automatically becomes the guide and the grounding of all ministry as well. And as promised earlier, it's here where it's appropriate to amend what I've been saying about being and becoming for two weeks now.

Up to now, I've made it sound as if being and becoming are always at odds with one another for people of faith. This is often true; with Jesus' temptation today to become the world's sign rather than to be God's sign a case in point. But even though what I've said works a lot of the time, it doesn't work when Jesus becomes the goal, the guide, and the grounding of all ministry as he has today. Provided Christ is involved, our reading from Ephesians lets us know that being and becoming can actually cohabit. When we are the people God has called us to be, today's second reading rightly says that we're going to become more like Christ. This is the one time becoming someone other than the person God has made us to be shall be good and salutary. It shall be good and salutary when we become more like Christ.

But again, becoming more like Christ can't be severed or cut off from being the unique and evolving people Christ has gifted us to be. Our reading from Ephesians makes this clear. When we are the people Christ has gifted us to be, we will bit by bit become more like Christ until Christ indeed fills as our reading Ephesians predicts he will. This makes Christ not just the goal, the guide, and the grounding of all ministry, but also its ultimate and eternal gain. And do we ever want to gain Christ. To reference our reading from John, how shall we never hunger or thirst again? It's going to happen when we gain Christ eternally. It's going to happen when we ourselves are forever freed from hunger and thirst and other causes of death as Christ was on the day of his resurrection. But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. Though Christ shall

ultimately be the eternal gain of all ministry, we're not there yet. For now, Christ shall remain the goal, the guide, and the grounding of all ministry; with this only changing when history's final trumpet shall sound upon Christ's return. And how shall this happen?

Through being—through being the unique and evolving individuals Christ has gifted and is gifting each of us to be. Sometimes we'll discover this person by praying, "Precious Lord, take my hand." Sometimes we'll discover this person through fellowship with other Christians. Sometimes we'll discover who God would have us be in real time and space through the manner in which the word of God and the sacraments of God speak to us and our circumstances. But no matter the method of discovery, the goal, the guide, and the grounding shall always be Christ. And the bottom line is that Christ and his cross cannot be separated. Christ becomes our goal, Christ becomes our guide, Christ becomes our grounding, when we deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow after him; when we too make the sacrifices necessary to bring my needs and our needs into perfect balance. Let's go be that balance as Christ enables it. Amen.