

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

June 21/22, 2008

“Fear Not!”

Matthew 10:5a, 21-33

In March, 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt took the oath of office as the thirty-second president of the United States. The nation was in a terrible depression. Hundreds of banks had closed their doors because they had run out of money. Millions of people were out of work. And it seemed that everyone was afraid of what the future would bring. But President Roosevelt's inaugural address gave new hope to the American people when he said, “This is ... the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today ... So first of all let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself ... nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” That's something that we would do well to remember in our day as well. In a way, that's the point that Jesus was making to his first disciples and, in that, to us as well, in today's Gospel lesson. As we heard last week, Jesus had just returned from a missionary journey into the northern parts of Galilee where he had preached and taught and healed every manner of sickness and disease. And the Bible says that he had compassion on the people for they were like sheep without a shepherd. Upon his return, he commissioned his disciples to go out in his name and to continue the work he had begun. It was within that context that he then spoke the words of our text for today. His disciples, he said, weren't to expect a bed of roses out there. Everyone wasn't going to welcome them with open arms. As a matter of fact, they could expect some tough opposition if they did what he was sending them out to do. After all, that's what he himself encountered and, as his followers, they should expect no better. True, some would recognize them as God's representatives and receive and believe the message that they were bringing about the kingdom of God being at hand in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ, but others would not.

But whether they were received and believed or not, they were not to fear. Even though the task of bringing the Gospel to people might appear to be overwhelming and even though they might well face opposition, rejection, and even persecution and death, they were not to fear. They were not to fear, Jesus said, because, first of all, God, who is the judge of all, would vindicate them – if not in the short run then certainly in the long. If they were to fear at all, he said, then they ought to fear God and not man for after all man can only kill the body but God can kill both the body and soul. By this Jesus meant to remind them that, in the end, mere mortals posed no real threat to them or their work. God was still God and He still was in control and since they belonged to God through him there really was nothing to fear. But second of all, they were not to fear because God

cared for them. If God cared enough about seemingly insignificant sparrows to care when one falls to the ground then how much more wouldn't He care for them, especially if they were doing His business? In fact, they were so important to God, Jesus said, and to the carrying out of His work in this world that He, like a doting parent knows the exact number of teeth his or her toddler has, even knew the exact number of hairs on their heads. You see, they weren't to fear not only because God was in control but also because He loved them and cared for them and would be with them no matter what forever.

Assured and believing, they were to go out into the world boldly and courageously as Christ's ambassadors. They were to acknowledge him before men and, as they did, Jesus assured them that he would acknowledge them before his Father in heaven. And so they went.

The application for our lives is clear. We, too, have been called by grace through faith in Jesus Christ to be his disciples – his followers – just as surely as those first twelve were some two thousand years ago. And just like those twelve, we too have been commissioned to be his ambassadors in the world – to go and preach and teach and heal in Jesus' name – and in so doing, acknowledge him before men. That's what the Great Commission is all about. And like the world of those first twelve our world is, by and large, as unreceptive and foreboding as theirs was. And like them, Jesus knows that we too may fear – afraid that we may not live up to what he has made us to be through our baptism into him—afraid to really live and speak and act as he has called us to because of fear of what others may think or say or do – afraid that our friends and neighbors, our family and relatives, our co-workers and acquaintances may think we're some kind of “religious nut” – or simply afraid because we think we may fail in the attempt.

It's been said, and rightly so, that fear is the greatestcrippler of the Christian life – that fear stops more Christians from really living for Jesus, from really giving him their whole heart and life than any real opposition could ever hope to accomplish.

Jesus reminds us today that it doesn't have to be that way. The Bible says that “perfect love casts out fear.” Certainly God's love for us, especially as we have experienced it and continue to experience it in and through His Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ, moves us by the power of the Holy Spirit to love God and our fellowman more and more as we grow in our Christian faith and life. And as we grow in that Christian faith and life – especially as our faith and life are fed by Word and Sacrament – we grow in our obedience to His will and in our trust in His promises.

Fear not! God knows and understands and He stands ready again today to strengthen us in faith and life and in our witness to Christ in this world. Remember, in Christ we really don't have anything to fear but fear itself.

May God help us to overcome all fear and live a bold and courageous life in Jesus' name this coming week. Amen.