

The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost – 2021

1 Kings 19:1-8

Ephesians 4:17—5:2

John 6:35-51

Every morning, as we began our day at VAW-88, we would take a walk. It was not as casual as it sounds. At Naval Air Station Miramar, as high a profile Naval Station as there was in the mid to late eighties, taking a walk every morning was critical to the mission of protecting the United States of America. It had to do with engines, the engines on the high-performance aircraft. There were only two types of aircraft at Miramar in those days: F-14 Tomcats and E2-C Hawkeyes. Everyone in my squadron (VAW 88) would line up, shoulder to shoulder, and walk from the hangar, past all our aircraft to the furthest extent of the flight line and back. Every other squadron would do the same. The aircraft had engines that sucked air like a giant Hoover vacuum on steroids. Any solid object in the vicinity of the intake would get pulled into the engine and would shred the guts of the highest value item on the airplane – the air compressor, the combustion chamber and the turbine. So, every morning we walked. With our heads down, we walked. With our eyes tuned to anything on that flight line that didn't belong, we walked.

FOD Walkdowns they were called – Foreign Object Debris or Foreign Object Damage; the meaning of FOD changed from day to day depending on the mood of the Secretary of the Navy. Airdale, the aviation community in the Navy, was obsessed with Foreign Object Damage. Every tool in every work-center was shadowed. That is to say that an outline of every tool, in bright orange or blue tape, was stuck behind where the tool was to go. If a tool was missing it was obvious. If a tool was missing you didn't go home. Obsessed; it was contagious. Everyone knew the standard to which we were held: protect the mission, protect the assets, no mistakes and no excuses. It starts with taking a walk.

The church is obsessed. There is one entity, one commodity, one gift that we protect with a Spirit-born eagerness. What is the engine of the church? It is grace. Grace is God's entity, God's love, God's movement toward fallen humanity. Grace is Christ on the Holy Cross. Grace is a salvation you do not deserve, a heaven you could never earn, a new-life that is pure gift. The church obsessed. Grace drives sinners to their knees in adoration and lifts them out of their graves. Grace turns people of every color and status into one worshipping community. Grace is a father running toward his prodigal son, calling for a ring, a robe, a pair of sandals, and a fattened calf. Grace is God washing sinners' feet on the night before His blood is poured out by a whipping post. Grace is what is laid in a manger in Bethlehem and it is what washed you the day you were baptized. Grace is what brings you forgiveness. Grace envelops you; grace leads you; grace informs you as to who you are; grace abides with you when no one else will. We are rightly obsessed. God's goodness is our obsession. Regularly, we walk and look for anything that would damage the gift of grace.

Grace has a form. Christ crucified is the form of grace. Christ crucified is in the Word. Christ crucified and risen is why you are here, in this Divine Service. Christ crucified, for you and for the whole world, is in the water of holy baptism. Grace has a form. Christ crucified and risen is in the bread of His body and the wine of His blood. When you receive that sacrament you receive grace – God's unmerited favor in the person of His Son. Is grace worth protecting? Is

the engine of the church something for which you will walk, shoulder to shoulder, in order to protect? Or do you think that grace is some abstraction, a theological hypothetical and not the vibrant reality upon which the church has lived for 2000 years?

America is going through a season where the foundational principles of our common life are being challenged. Personal liberty, the rule of law (everyone being treated equally under the law), freedom from government intrusion (unchecked and undefined authority of governmental agencies to control life), freedom of speech, freedom of religion – it is seemingly all under attack. Will the church be any different? Is grace worth protecting?

Grace is the hill that Martin Luther was willing to die on. “Here I stand; I can do no other; so help me God. Amen.” St. Paul wrote this: “When you were dead in trespasses and sins, God made you alive with Christ – by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:5). St. Paul wrote this: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Grace is for your neighbor who is suffering with guilt and so many legalistic demands. Grace is for the dying who need confidence that what Christ has done is enough. Grace is the evangel in evangelism, the Word that brings people into the embrace of Christ the King. We *will* protect it. We will celebrate it and savor it and sing it and teach it to our children.

Jesus was teaching about grace, teaching about the bread of life. The Lord Christ was adamant: He would accomplish His Father’s will. He would claim His own and raise them at the last day. And the Jews grumbled (John 6:41). It is reminiscent of the Exodus. Their murmuring reveals their disbelief and their opposition to what Jesus had just said about Himself. That is humanity. We grumble. We defy God. We choose our own path. We want to fabricate our own doctrine, our own ideas of what the church should be. We are not obedient. We allow Foreign Object Debris into our lives, into our hearts, into Christ’s church. Is grace not the most sublime reality that you have ever known? Even as they grumbled, Jesus reiterated grace. “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44). Your salvation, it is God’s Work, His blessed and holy work from first to last, which He joyfully completes without any assistance from you. When the Jews grumbled, our Lord did not compromise. As He was pierced, grace was heard tumbling out of His mouth, grace was heard distinctly. “Father, forgive them.” He will always give to you what you need. His grace is sufficient.

Jesus is the One who does the Father’s will. He did that in your place. About His Father’s will Jesus said this: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). About His Father’s will, Jesus said this: “Father, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39). So, Jesus speaks about His Father’s will as the food He eats and the cup that He drinks. Jesus speaks about the work that the Father gives Him to accomplish as the food that He eats and the cup that He drinks. Is that will of the Father, the work that Jesus accomplishes, is that not grace for you? Sacrifice and blood and your immeasurable debt paid in full? And now that grace is extended to you in the Sacrament of Holy Communion – the food that you eat and the cup that you drink. Will we not defend this priceless treasure? Will we not lift it up to all who need grace full and free?

We have a journey in front of us and it is not going to be easy. Maintaining faith in this broken world is difficult enough but so many forces are beginning to align themselves against Christ and His church. Are you relying on your own steam in the journey to heaven or are you relying on Christ and His grace? “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you” (1 Kings 19:7). So said the angel to Elijah as he collapsed in a heap under the broom tree. I suspect that you know what that feels like. I suspect that your days are not a never-ending stream of successes and personal tributes from old friends and ticker-tape parades in your honor. “Elijah arose and ate and drank, and went on the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God” (1 Kings 19:8). The strength of that food; pair that with what Jesus says: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51).

Jesus promises never to lose you (John 6:39). I suggest to you that you coming to this altar to receive His body and blood is proof.