

Proper 17A 2017 Sermon

Matthew 16:21-28

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

(Most of what I share here is taken directly from David Lose¹)

I'd like to call on your imagination: Imagine, for a moment, that you are Peter. Jesus has just called you the rock on which he will build his church (as we heard in last week's Gospel ²). He's even given you a new name: before, you were Simon, but now you are Peter, the Rock. Yet in the very next minute, as we see in *today's* Gospel, Jesus is calling you "a stumbling block." From "Rock" as foundation stone to "rock" as stumbling block, in a matter of minutes. Imagine that!

And perhaps that's where the difficulty lies: Peter cannot imagine. He cannot imagine that Jesus has come not just to comfort people but to **free** them. Comforting isn't that hard – just give people a little more of what they already have and tell them it will be alright. But *freedom* is different. Freedom requires that you see that what you have isn't life-giving in the first place.

Now, the common assumption is that when Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah, he had in his imagination a warrior-king like David, one who would drive out the Romans and liberate the Jewish people. And when you stop to think about it, that's a pretty understandable hope. The Romans were foreign occupiers, not only imposing Roman law on the Jewish people, but **taxing** the people to *support* their occupation and backing up their subjugation and taxation by violence (crucifixion being the *most* violent, though not uncommon, Roman practice). The problem with Peter's expectation of a warrior Messiah is not that it's unreasonable, but that *it doesn't change anything*. It doesn't change anything. Rome is there in force and by violence. If Jesus were a warrior king, he would simply use **greater** force and violence to drive the Romans out. The problem is

that when Jesus is gone, someone with even more force or willing to do greater violence takes over yet again. Who's in charge may change, but the wheel of force and violence keeps turning. Nothing *really* changes.

Jesus knows this. He knows that by introducing different values and a different mindset – a mindset that functions through forgiveness, mercy, and love rather than retribution, violence, and hate – he is challenging the powers that be, advocating an end to the age-old wheel of force and violence which propped up not only the Roman Empire, but practically every empire in human history, before or since. Moreover, Jesus knows that the wheel of force and violence will not tolerate his obstruction but will run him over. And Peter can't imagine that! He can't imagine that the Messiah would be run over. The Messiah was supposed to run over the Romans, not the Romans run over the Messiah! That's something he can't imagine.

But Jesus' understanding of what it is to be the Messiah is something altogether different. He is true to his nature and to God's nature of forgiveness, mercy, and love, and he is not going to deviate from that – even when the inevitable consequence is that he will be killed by the powers that be. So Jesus' prediction of his suffering and death was not a supernatural vision of the future; it was a rational understanding of how the Jewish religious authorities and Roman Empire handle someone promulgating a life of forgiveness, mercy, and love which challenges the whole system of retribution, violence, and hate – the very system that propped up the Roman Empire, and every Empire that had ever existed. And this is the only system Peter knows! So it is no surprise that he can't imagine a Messiah who, rather than crushing the Roman Empire, is instead crushed himself.

So it's not surprising that Jesus was killed. What **is** surprising is that God raised Jesus from the dead, which vindicates Jesus' life and mindset of love, forgiveness, and sacrifice as being that method which God desires and which will ultimately prevail. Of course, the idea that forgiveness, mercy, and love might prevail is hard to imagine, in light of how prevalent force and violence are in the world. But God raising Jesus from the dead is proof that, in the words of Rob Bell, "Love Wins." And this is exactly what Jesus invites us into: a life shaped by love and forgiveness and actions shaped by compassion and hope. And this new Life is not accomplished by force of will or effort; rather, love, forgiveness, compassion and hope grow the more we enter into the flow of the Holy Spirit, and participate in the Life and nature of our God, who IS love and compassion. We become one with the incarnate God; become "little Christs," as C.S. Lewis said.³ St. Paul explained his participation in the life of Christ by saying, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."⁴

It can be hard to imagine. Like Peter, what we *most* often want is just a little more of what the world already offers – be it power or security or wealth or status or popularity or whatever. But Jesus didn't come to comfort us with a little more; he came to *free* us. And freedom means first realizing that we've settled for

something that **isn't** life-giving – have settled for a *surface* meaning of life rather than the deep life in God which God intends. Only when we can recognize this can we hear God's promise of not just more of the same but something entirely different. God's promise of abundant life only *means* something after what we *previously* accepted as life **dies**. That's what Jesus means when he says "those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Allow me to rephrase that in a way that might be easier to understand: Those who lose their small life, their boxed-in life, will find their Large Life, their True Life, their free life.

At the beginning of the Oscar winning musical, "*Oliver!*," the young Oliver Twist is living in the slavish conditions of a British work-house. The forced child labor is harsh, and at mealtime the children are fed nothing but a single bowl of gruel. The children watch as the governors who fund the workhouse eat a sumptuous banquet. The children draw straws to determine which child will challenge "the system" by daring to approach their taskmaster and ask for a second helping of gruel – ask simply for "more."

Oliver and the rest of the boys think that the solution to their problem is to obtain more of the same: more gruel. The farthest they can stretch their imagination is imagining that they might one day be able to taste some of the "Food, glorious food!" which the workhouse governors are eating. What they *cannot* imagine is that they might one day be free altogether from the slavery of the workhouse! They cannot see beyond the system in which they live.

This is **Peter's** problem, and ours. We think that the solution to our life's struggles is a little more of the same: a little more money, a little more security, a little more control, a little more free time, a little more pleasure. (When once asked, "How much money is enough money?" John D. Rockefeller replied, "Just a little bit more.")⁵ But Jesus did not come to give us a little more of the same; he came to set us free. The problem we Americans have is that we think we are already free! We think freedom means the ability to elect the government we want, choose the healthcare we want, buy the guns we want, refuse to sell wedding cakes to those we don't approve of. But all of this is basically just more of the same! The kind of freedom Jesus offers is something entirely *different*. It is not the freedom to do what our small self, our self-centered self wants to do; rather, it is freedom **from** this small, self-centered self and for a life in God, which is our True, large self. Freedom from the self-orientation which believes that my life is about me. Those who lose this small life will find their True life.

Richard Rohr puts it this way: "In order to be free **for** life, we must quite simply be free **from** our small selves."⁶ "You can have political or economic freedom, but if you are not free from your own ego, from your own centrality inside of your own thinking, I don't think you're very free at all. In fact, your actions and behavior will be totally predictable [and determined]. Everything will revolve

around your [self-image, need to be right, need to be successful, need to have everything under control, need for] security, survival, self-protection, self-validation, self, self, self!...”⁷

We will never be free as long as we stay in this box of self-orientation.

Can you imagine a life outside that box? Imagine a life freed *from* your small self and *for* your larger, True Self – who you are in God? Who you were created to be?

Can you imagine?

AMEN

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-13-a-can-you-imagine/>

² Matthew 16:13-20

³ “Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.” — C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

⁴ Galatians 2:20

⁵ http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/John_D._Rockefeller

⁶ <https://cac.org/freedom-from-the-self-2015-06-12/>

⁷ <https://cac.org/contemplative-mind-mind-liberated-2016-05-17/>