

September 3, 2017 13th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

(ideas about the Matthew text: DavidLose.net for this this Sunday, posted on 8-28-17)

Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ. Amen.

This summer during our time on that little island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, we were part of the weekly pilgrimage.

We hiked around the island at first on gravel roads and then along the coast, and later through spongy bogs, stopping periodically to reflect, to pray, sometimes to sing.

One of the first stops was at a cross roads and there we pondered the cross roads in our lives.

The choices before us, the decisions to go one way, rather than another, and that process of discernment.

Our Gospel this morning picks up where last Sunday's left off.

Honestly, it's a bit of whiplash, for Peter has just confessed Jesus as the Messiah, the son of the living God. Jesus has just praised Peter, I'll rename you Peter, the rock, the cornerstone of the church.

And, all too quickly Peter struggles to grasp what Jesus is doing, what it will look like to follow Jesus.

As Peter tries to stop Jesus, rebuking him, Jesus stops Peter: Get behind me, Satan, Jesus says.

Peter expected Jesus to be a king, probably like David, a warrior, one who could free the people from the Roman occupier's thumb with just enough violence, because that's just how it's done.

Trouble is, this cross for Jesus, this discipleship, is founded in mercy and love, in forgiveness, not violence, not hatred, not retribution.

Today's gospel is a cross roads of sorts, for Jesus and for Peter—which way will they go?

Which way will we go?

As the people of Houston cry,

as immigrant families cling to their existence,

as students anxiously prepare for something new and good,

which way will we go?

how will we follow this living God in the days ahead?

Can we imagine the freedom this cross offers,

not freedom based in violence or the security of our stuff,

or even the security of this world,

but freedom rooted deeply in another way of loving one another?

Paul's letter to the people of Rome, the 2nd reading today, offers a way of living a Jesus-life.

Many of you surely noticed that when we printed it for the bulletin, we sliced it into short little phrases.

Admonitions, if you will, admonitions that all too often we hear in one long chain and then fail to grasp.

In a moment I'm going to ask Sheila, our lector this morning, to come back up and to read again, slowly, section by section, from this letter to the Romans.

As Sheila reads, listen to each phrase and consider: Which comes most naturally, most easily, to you?

And which one do you find most challenging?

On one of the green post its write down, which comes most naturally for you.

And on the blue post its write, which one you find most challenging.

[Sheila reads]

So, which one comes most naturally?

And, what challenges you? ...

Take these post its with you today, hang them on your mirror or computer, some place you'll see them.

These represent the cross, they aren't supposed to be easy or even light, and yet at the cross roads God calls us to new ways of living and God loves us into making this new way real.

Someone told me this week that he needed to read this passage through before he heard the news and then again after he heard it.

This is what taking up our cross can look like.

Let's shift gears and listen one more time.

That first time we were thinking of ourselves as individuals, but most truly we're called into community.

This time, listen again but with this community or a community that you are part of in mind.

On the green post it, consider as a community of Christ, as a community called to take up the cross, which of these comes most easily, most naturally to our community?

And on the blue, write down, which one do you feel is most challenging for us as a community?

[Sheila reads]

These aren't easy, none of them are.

And yet, I am convinced that if we take Jesus' call seriously, the freedom of the cross transforms us as individuals, us as family, us as community.

That compels me, that's the cross roads I want to be at, and it's a good spot to be on this long weekend as we head into the fall term.

As Zach plays the introduction for our hymn of the day, bring forward the blue and the green post its that you created for the community.

Place them on the cross or in the basket near the cross. Read what others wrote.

And pray with me for the way our community is transformed as we let love be genuine, as we stand at the cross roads. Amen.