

August 30, 2020 13th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hop

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28

[Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus, Losing and Saving, for this date, posted on August 23, 2020.
John Bell's text and Tom Witt's music in Bring Your Best to Our Worst, GIA 1998 and Augsburg Fortress 2009.]]

Grace and peace to you, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's the verbs that caught me this morning.

In our reading from Romans there is a bounty of verbs: Let love be genuine, hate (or even abhor) what is evil, hold fast, outdo, do not lag, bless, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere, contribute, extend, weep, live, feed.

In the gospel, Jesus pivots.

Where up to this point Jesus had been preaching and healing, feeding and welcoming, now he turns his attention toward Jerusalem,
toward the cross, toward brokenness and pain, toward his death.

Losing and saving take on new meaning.

"If any want to become my followers," he tells them,
"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."

On Tuesday, when my colleagues and I studied together this passage,
we had an exchange that intrigued me.

We were on Zoom, not at Maria's Café on Franklin savoring corn pancakes,
but the conversation wasn't so different.

One pastor commented that many in their congregation find these to be unhelpful verses,
verses that they hear with resistance.

Resistance because of the violence it might seem to glorify.

Resistance because it begs us to question how the cross, indeed pain, could be part of God's intention.

Resistance because this feels like judgement rather than love, and isn't it about love?

I was left wondering how you all might hear this...

If these resonate and inspire? Or turn you away?

Or maybe they never really catch your heart and mind and body?

It was about that time when another colleague wondered aloud if the resistance to this passage might be rooted, at least in part, in privilege.

He said this tenderly, curiously, naming how deeply these verses touch him, particularly after walking with his son through cancer and finally his son's death.

Now, privilege has a multitude of faces, and we each carry it differently in different situations.

Privilege, in a way then, allows us to *think* we can keep pain and brokenness, death—Jesus' death or our own—at arms length.

That colleague who had lost his son...he knows that isn't possible.

And in turn he has found deeper meaning in words like losing and saving.

"If any want to become my followers," Jesus says,

"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."

Without the hindsight of the resurrection,

still focused on healing and preaching, feeding and welcoming,

Jesus' disciples struggled with his quick pivot.

They had hoped for a revolution.

They had prayed for the reign of God.

They had strategized for liberation and the overthrow of the Roman oppressors.

And instead it's humiliation and pain, death and disgrace, that Jesus describes to them.

Really, Jesus? No wonder Peter pushes back.

These words must have seemed confusing, devastating.

This isn't how they'd hoped or expected things to go down.

On this side of the resurrection, with the benefit of history,

we're left to figure out what this passage means for us.

We can push back in a heady, theoretical resistance, like my colleague described.

We can make commitments, somehow elevating our faith, you know, praying more and such.

We can, as some traditions do, deny ourselves, opts for austerity that seeks to remove the pleasures of life, but that doesn't sound like the abundance Jesus preaches.

In heavy days like these, it would be easier, far easier, to avoid the weight of this passage,
the burden of truly following.

As Debie Thomas wonders, “What does it mean to deny myself?”

“How shall I deny myself so that the gospel might thrive, here and now?”

“How shall I save my life by losing it for Jesus sake in 21st century America?”

What does all this mean in the midst of a global pandemic?

As administrators and students and teachers and parents are doing
a million contortions to keep bodies safe?

and to adjust to ever-evolving uncertainties?

As anxiety skyrockets, and depression and isolation plague?

What does this mean as Jacob Blake is shot the back by Kenosha police in front of his young children?

Or as Elijah McClain’s family marks the anniversary of his killing?

Or as we remember how 65 years ago this week 14 year old Emmett Till was lynched?

What does this mean as a white teenager brings a semi-automatic rifle to Kenosha? And uses it?

Or as Minneapolis erupts again? And fragile trust is tested and leaders seek their footing?

What does it mean as the season of political conventions concludes and thousands march on Washington
in the spirit of Dr. King?

What does it mean as fires burn in the west,

as water-logged parishes dig out in the south,

as storms churn

as the planet warms?

Dear friends, what are we willing to lose in these heavy times?

And what do we stand to gain, to save?

Debie Thomas writes:

“What if Jesus’s call is for us to stop clutching at this life so desperately?

To step out of the vicious cycles...?

What would it look like, in this time and place, to lay down our fears so that others might live?

To willingly set aside our own interests and (dare I say it?) our own liberties,

so that we can prioritize” ... loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves?

“To take up a cross [then] as Jesus did is to stand, always, in the center of the world’s pain.”

As summer turns to fall,

as school begins on some platform or another,

three months after the murder of George Floyd, numb and tired—oh so tired—

we could try to get back to normal...whatever that means.

Or ... we could stand at the center of the world’s pain.

That where I invite you to linger this week—in the center of the worlds pain.

And claim it, do it intentionally,

not just because the media pulls you this way and that,

not out of guilt, or shame.

But do it because you recognize the pain, the brokenness.

Do it because it’s in the midst of the world’s pain that we find life, Jesus’ life.

I think that’s what my colleague who’d lost his son was trying to say.

He wasn’t glorifying their tragedy, their loss,

but in losing, he’d learned and experienced the vital ways of God—

that grace will carry us, that love will hold us,

That in the midst of brokenness something is birthing.

“To take up a cross as Jesus did is to stand, always, in the center of the world’s pain.”

Beloved ones, as we close today, as we sing our hymn, take a moment, on your own, on a scrap of paper,

or on the Zoom or live stream chat, make a note:

What will this look like for you?

For some this will be specific, for other it may be an openness and alertness to what will come.

Be as honest and real as possible.

How will you stand with the world’s pain?

How will you carry the cross?

The hymn of the day is a simple, lovely prayer from John Bell of the Iona Community in Scotland.

We’ll sing the refrain, and then Gus will lead the verses.

Pray with me now:

Bring your best to our worst, bring your peace to our pain. God of love, heal your people.

Bring your best to our worst, bring your peace to our pain. God of love, heal your people. Amen.