

The Way to Life Goes through Death

Sermon given by the Rev. Gracious Moyo on Sunday, August 30, 2020, at University Lutheran Church, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

St. Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace

Where there is hatred let me sow love

Where there is injury, pardon

Where there is doubt, faith

Where there is despair, hope

Where there is darkness, light and where there is sadness, joy.

O Lord, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled but to console

To be understood as to understand

To be loved as to love

For it is in giving that I receive

It is in pardoning that I am pardoned;

And it is in dying that I am born to eternal life. Amen

I have been thinking about the examples of people sacrificed or put their lives on the line for the sake of justice, safe and health community, and for the love of their country. There are many examples but I chose only three for the purpose of this sermon.

1. In 1961 a group of Nashville students resolved to reinforce the Freedom Rides. Two previous busloads of Freedom Riders had already encountered firebombing and severe beatings, and the Nashville students determined that the movement, having commenced, should not be allowed to fail.

No one could deny that these students experienced joy during their trials — the notorious Bull Connor complained, “I just couldn’t stand their singing” — but these students were fully mindful for the potential cost as well. The night before their departure, they had signed their last will and testaments. Singing hymns after signing one’s will: the cost and joy of discipleship.

2. Last month and just last week I saw what denying oneself looks like in Minnesota and Wisconsin. I saw demonstrators denying themselves for the

sake of justice, denying themselves for the sake of George Floyd and Jacob Blake's families. I saw people from all walks of life here in America and internationally standing on behalf hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Do you know some people lost friends through this? And some people were infected by the Virus in the quest for justice

3. Covid-19 frontline workers and first responders during the 9/11 and in times of disasters response and management.

Quizzed by Jesus about the wider public's perception of his identity, the disciples say that Jesus is a prophet but more than a prophet too. He is the anointed one of God, gifted with God's power, a power Jesus now turns over to his followers. Whatever we bind is bound. Whatever we loosen is loosened. Incredible power is now in our hands and with those hands we just might reshape the world! Peter receives the keys to the realm of heaven and his earthly authority carries heavenly significance. But now Jesus begins a process of reinterpreting what being the Messiah really means — and what following that Messiah entails for the disciples. If Peter cannot bear the revelation of Jesus' coming suffering (16:22), how will he respond when the focus shifts to disciples whose fate mimics that of Jesus?

As we noted last week, the disciples must have been buzzing with excitement in the wake of this revelatory moment. They must have been dazzled by the fact that theirs would be the generation that would bear witness to the culmination of so many of God's promises. God's anointed will respond in a way that will transform the world and set things right. Nothing will ever be the same from this moment forward.

In this excitement, they get it half right. The world is shifting under their feet but not as they or we would have expected.

From that time on," Jesus starts to explain that the Messiah would not be embraced but rejected, not crowned but executed, not empowered by might but weakened by affliction.

What a disappointment this must have been, what a baffling shift in expectations. Clearly, this is not what Peter had imagined when he dared to speak the truth about Jesus' identity. He spoke correctly though incompletely, for Peter begins to seek to correct the Messiah about the nature and scope of his mission. Listen, Jesus, this cannot be what God intends for you. There must be a different way. This is not what our deliverer ought to do. Suffering and dying is what we have all endured, prophet and ordinary person alike. You are supposed to be different. You are supposed to save us from all our enemies!

Jesus' reproach is anything but subtle: "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter thus moves from the heights of recognition to the depths of rejection. What can this mean?

Can you imagine? Last week, Jesus was saying you're "the rock on which I will build my church" and the next he's calling you "a stumbling block." That's not just great word play – from cornerstone to stumbling block – but such a reversal of relational fortune that it had to be incredibly painful.

The common assumption is that when Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah, he had in mind a warrior-king like David, one who would drive out the Romans and liberate the Israelites. We too, often want a strong God, even a warrior God, who will come in to save us from our problems. It's hard to accept, let alone celebrate, Jesus coming to us in vulnerability, suffering, and death. The Romans were foreign occupiers, not only imposing Roman law but taxing the people to support their occupation and backing up their occupation, order, and taxation by violence. Rome is there in force and by violence. Jesus knows this. He knows that by introducing a different logic – one that runs by forgiveness, mercy, and love rather than retribution, violence, and hate – he is challenging the powers that be. **It's hard to imagine, I know, in light of the how prevalent force and violence seem in the world. But it is just what Jesus invites us to: lives shaped by love and forgiveness and actions shaped by compassion and hope.**

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*" (16:24-25)

Jesus' verbs say it all. Deny the self, take up the cross, follow Christ.

The way to interpret these words, is simply to recognize a) that suffering happens and b) whether you choose it, embrace it, or resist it, Christ is present with you in it. God in Jesus came amongst us bearing a vital message of love and acceptance **even though Jesus knew that humanity's likely response would be to reject the message and kill the messenger.** In this sense, the cross was not Jesus' goal, but rather the outcome of Jesus' fidelity in the face of unfaithful people. He didn't choose the cross but rather trusted God to work even through the extreme of the cross for the sake of the world God loves so much.

Similarly, the cross isn't something we choose, but rather it is something that finds us. Sometimes what is redemptive in our suffering is obvious – the sacrifices we make for our family members and friends, foregoing individual "rights" during a pandemic for the sake of community health – and sometimes it's hard to tell if there

is anything good at all, let alone redemptive, in the suffering we see and experience. **And yet Christ identifies with all of our suffering, took it all on himself in his suffering, and promises to meet us in ours.**

What does “take up your cross and deny yourself” look like in this case? **Perhaps it’s following Jesus’ lead and, to the best of our ability, to make decisions and act in a way that reflects God’s love for us and all people, God’s acceptance of us and all people, God’s desire for abundant life for us and all people. “Deny yourself” is not the same, I think, as “forget all about yourself” and certainly is not “debase yourself.” God is in it for everyone, not just us and that is, I think, what denying yourself looks like – seeing that you and I are part of something larger, in recognizing that there is, in fact, no meaningful “you” or “I” apart from “us.”**

And this is the path upon which any of Jesus’ followers must tread. **The disciples are not just witnesses of Jesus’ suffering but participants in it. Disciples are to walk Jesus’ grim path. They just don’t get to tell about it. They actually will live through Jesus’ suffering in their own bodies. What does it look like to follow the Messiah, the anointed of God? That path is lined with crosses and paved with Jesus’ passion. This is a matter of life and death for his followers as much as it is for Jesus**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic *Cost of Discipleship*, had much to say about this text: "To endure the cross is *not* a tragedy; it is the suffering which is the *fruit* of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. When it comes, it is not an accident, but a necessity. It is not the sort of suffering which is inseparable from this mortal life, but the suffering which is an essential part of the specifically Christian life. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer so famously said, **discipleship means "adherence" to this One who is going to the Cross. It is our decision every day as to how we will live out this call.**

There is so much suffering going on just now, Dear Siblings. Whether related to COVID, racial injustice, economic hardship, emotional despair, or more. In all these things, not just Christ’s cross is present, but Christ himself – holding us, lamenting with us, encouraging us, and promising us the strength to endure and, having endured, to flourish and, flourishing, to help others do the same.

The cross will appear to span finality. The cross will appear to be the end of the story for us all. But the promise Jesus makes here, and the promises God has made from

the beginning assure a future, a future in which justice blooms, a future in which the hungry are fed and the imprisoned are comforted

Can you imagine that God is at work in and through your life for the good of the world? Can you imagine that this congregation has something of value to offer its community? Can you imagine that when you befriend the lonely or encourage the frightened heaven rejoices? Can you imagine that, though afraid, when you stand up to those who spew hate God is with you? Can you imagine that even small acts of love and generosity challenge the world order introduce a different reality? Can you imagine that God wants for us not just comfort but freedom? Can you imagine that love is more powerful than hate? Can you imagine that God raised Jesus from the dead?

I am grateful to have been loved and to be able to love, because that liberates. Love liberates. It doesn't just hold -- that's ego. Love liberates. It doesn't bind. So, I invite you my dear Siblings in hope to the kind of love and justice Jesus here commends. Amen!