

Sermon: Pentecost XII: Proper 17

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August 31, 2014

Year A

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalm 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

How do we express our Christian identity... do we follow what Paul wrote in Romans: is our love genuine... do we hate what is evil... hold fast to what is good... do we love one another with mutual affection... outdo one another in showing honor... are we quick to show zeal... to rejoice in hope... do we wear a cross... like this one... but *wearing* a cross... is not the same thing as *bearing* a cross... and so what does that mean...

Some of you may know that the First Noble Truth of Buddhism is *life is suffering*... not quite an American value... but in the Pali language... the word for suffering... *dukkha*... also refers to anything that is temporary... conditional... or made up of other things... even something enjoyable can be *dukkha*... because it too will end...

Every one of us here... is suffering in some way... there may be disappointment in relationships... a loss of relationships or loved ones... those we care about who make poor choices... we may seek forgiveness but be unable to get it... there may be children who don't call... the loss of employment...

My suffering these days... is about my parents... being separated during a time of declining health... being able to *be there* for them in spirit... but unable to really do much... being able to pray for them... but not cook dinner... some of my suffering... comes from their suffering... because I love them and don't want them to suffer...

When Jesus says that he will be killed... and Peter rebukes him... when Peter says: *God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you*... he is both acknowledging Jesus as God... but imposing human will on God's will... it brings to mind the passage from

Isaiah 55: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts... and my ways are not your ways, says the LORD... For as the heavens are higher than the earth... so my ways are higher than your ways... and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.*

This is the Peter... who like me... wants to protect those he loves from suffering... he just can't fathom... yet... not all the light has come through the cracks of his broken clay... yet... how his Lord and God could die... Peter's vision hits a brick wall at physical death... he can't yet see beyond it... Jesus says that he will rise again... but evidently Peter doesn't hear that... and so Jesus doesn't bless Peter's expression of love ... because it suffers from confusion about faithfulness...

And when Jesus says: *Get behind me, Satan...* he's not... as is popularly believed... calling Peter the Devil... in this context the word has more to do with being a challenger... what Jesus is really saying is *don't challenge me... stop giving me a hard time... just get in line and follow me...* when Jesus says don't be a stumbling block... he wants Peter to be a building block...

And when Jesus asks: *For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life...* he's not talking about physical death... the word *life* in Greek... *soo-veen...* means soul... self... inner life... what Jesus is saying is... *what good is it if you gain the world but are dead inside... have no life inside you...* and it reminds me of the passages in Matthew and Luke where Jesus says: *Let the dead bury their own dead...*

Jesus invites us to take up our cross and follow him... he asks us to do it voluntarily... it's not a command... it's not something to be done without our consent... to be imposed on us... against our will... even in this... God in Christ honors our free will... lets us choose whether... and when... and which ones we want to carry... on our Christian Way...

I think that this passage has led to centuries of mistaken thinking... and unnecessary suffering... the deaths of martyrs have been romanticized... have been seen by some as a sure-fire way to get into heaven... people have inflicted suffering on themselves in order to avoid human desires... or have maybe sought it out for its own sake... as a way of identifying with the suffering of Christ... or they've refused to avoid it when it's been inflicted by others... believing somehow that it's God's will for them... but how do we reconcile suffering with our vow to strive for justice and peace for all people and respect the dignity of every human being...

These days... we reject the suffering that bullies inflict... we reject the suffering that sexual harassment and rape inflict... we reject the killing of innocent civilians as collateral damage... as though its nothing more than the cost of doing business... we reject the suffering that greed... or racial prejudice... or homophobia inflict... but the abundant life that Jesus came to give doesn't include suffering... it includes abundant health and vitality and peace and contentment...

Jesus doesn't invite us to take up our crosses because he wants us to suffer the way he did... he doesn't invite us to follow him because the way is hard... the way is hard because there's more Empire around us than Kingdom... suffering isn't a cross we bear for suffering's sake... suffering is not a cross we bear... until we're willing to be transformed... the suffering of the cross transforms us...

I felt deep suffering and pain in the closet... until I was willing to be transformed by the cross... and receive new life... the pain I feel about my parents is transformed in my belief that they too will inherit eternal life... when we have a pain in our body... its a kind of suffering that's supposed to be transformative... we're supposed to do something about it so we can restore health and balance... when we're willing to be transformed by the suffering of others... the outcasts and the marginalized... we pursue social justice...

Jesus was certainly transformed by the cross... and he invites all of us to die to those things in ourselves that restrict... limit... or constrain... our natural and inherent ability to live as Paul recounts in Romans...

The Good News is that the disciples are like us... getting it wrong over and over again... they keep misunderstanding Jesus... just like we do... if they got all of it right... all of the time... they wouldn't be human... and we wouldn't even bother trying... and so like Peter... we too get to be blessed and a challenge to God... we get to see just who Jesus is and try to impose our will onto God too... we get to be a rock on which the church is built and a stumbling block in God's plans... bearers of the Kingdom's keys and the cause of a fender bender now and then...

And when Jesus says: *some standing here will not taste death...* he means us... because the heavenly Father of Jesus... who also dwells within us... enables us to acknowledge the mission and heavenly identity of Jesus... he means that our *soo-veen...* our inner life... will not die... *before we too see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom...*

Amen.