

Pentecost 13A (9/3/17)

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalm 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

We resist the way of the cross because we cannot bring ourselves to trust that it leads to abundant life. As long as we ignore the cross, Christian faith is nonthreatening, like membership in a club. But, when we acknowledge Jesus' cross, we face the inevitability of our own. Discipleship and sacrifice go hand in hand because standing with the hurting world involves sacrifice. Yet, this solidarity holds the potential for abundant life the world around, a life together marked by mutual love and attentiveness, a beloved community.

The city of Rome suffered a devastating fire in the year 64 CE. Many suspect that Emperor Nero, the infamous tyrant, initiated the fire himself, watching the destruction from his palace on Palatine Hill while singing and playing the lyre. But the emperor blamed the fire on the Christian community in the city, establishing a justification for Rome's first, but certainly not its last, persecution of Christians.

An apocryphal legend, the *Quo Vadis*, tells the story of the disciple Peter, quite advanced in age by the year 64, scurrying away from Rome as it burns. Hear the tale as it is told by theologian Douglas John Hall:

I have always thought that the legend of the *Quo Vadis* ought to be in the New Testament ...for it illustrates quite precisely the discipleship asked of those who follow the way of the cross. Whether or not such an event ever actually occurred is not the point. The point is that the early church found truth and sustenance in it, and so may we. According to the oral tradition, Peter, the "rock" (Matt. 16:18), the reputed cornerstone of the Christ's church, in a manner entirely consistent with his behavior as it *is* recorded in the Gospels (*and*, let us note, in a manner entirely consistent with the empirical *church* that he represents), is in the act of fleeing from burning Rome, where many Christians are undergoing the horrors of mad Nero's persecution. The old fisherman is moving with all possible haste along the Appian Way, lined with the tombs of patrician Romans, when suddenly he is apprehended by a vision of the Christ himself, heading in the opposite direction. "*Quo vadis, Domine?*" "Where are you going, Lord?" he asks. And the vision answers: "Into Rome, to

be crucified again.” Then Peter, once more humbled by truth, turns about and makes his way back into the flaming city and – according to tradition – to his own upside-down crucifixion.¹

Of course, this is not the first time Jesus has taught Peter that discipleship and sacrifice go hand in hand. “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked his disciples in last Sunday’s Gospel from Matthew. Filled with God’s truth, Peter replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus commended him: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! ...you are [Petros,] Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and [even] the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”²

Attaboy, Peter! His confidence must have swelled after that praise because he doesn’t hesitate to speak up again in today’s Gospel. This time, however, Peter is on the wrong side of God’s truth. As soon as his messianic identity is out in the open, Jesus begins to explain that he “must undergo great suffering at the hands of the [powers], and be killed....” But, Peter takes him aside and rebukes him – rebukes *Jesus* – saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” And this time, Jesus’ reaction is less than affirming: “Get behind me, Satan!” No longer the rock, the foundation of the church, Peter has become like the enemy of God, setting his mind “not on divine things but on human things.”

Who among us cannot see ourselves in Peter’s place? The messianic promise is finally fulfilled in our beloved rabbi, the magnetic teacher who has called us to a life of purpose, helped us reimagine the possibilities for human community, and rescued us from our fears. Our excitement builds as we envision a new era of freedom from foreign occupation and renewed faith in the God who chose us as

¹ *The Cross in Our Context*, 54.

² 16:15-18.

God's own people. And all with Jesus sitting on the Davidic throne! But he abruptly dashes our hopes with a prediction of his persecution and crucifixion. "God forbid it, Lord!" we would want to cry out, wouldn't we? "This must never happen to you." *If you suffer and die at the hands of those we thought you would replace, then nothing will change. The cross seems like the opposite of the life we want. So, we try to protect Jesus in order to protect ourselves.*³ *Not suffering, Lord, but self-fulfillment! Peter insists. Not sacrifice, but security!*

Peter resists the way of the cross again in the *Quo Vadis* legend, shuffling away from suffering only to be met by the Lord who calls him back to discipleship yet again. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." With these words from our Gospel echoing in the elderly Peter's memory, he turns around and, by the lead of the living Christ, returns to Rome to stand alongside those who suffer.

Whatever it is that causes us to recoil from the cross – whether it's the fear of pain and loss, or the shame of weakness, or the drive to be self-reliant – whatever it is, it's powerful. Like Peter, we resist the way of the cross because we cannot bring ourselves to trust that it leads to abundant life. In his rebuke of Jesus, Peter focuses on the promise of suffering, and so refuses to hear the promise of resurrection. Jesus "must undergo great suffering at the hands of the [powers], and be killed," yes, "*and on the third day be raised.*" And, Jesus extends the same resurrection promise to those who take up crosses of their own: "...those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

³ See Jin S. Kim, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 22.

Do we believe him? **Do we believe that in dying to ourselves we might become more fully alive, that loosening our grip on whatever we think will protect and sustain us holds the key to a better future?** As long as we ignore the cross, Christian faith is nonthreatening, like membership in a club. But, when we acknowledge Jesus' cross, we face the inevitability of our own. Discipleship and sacrifice, it turns out, go hand in hand. But, why? Douglas John Hall writes:

The risen Christ, in his eternal reign as in his historical sojourn, is always going toward this world, the world's rejection notwithstanding, and discipleship, when it is authentically so, is always a matter of being taken up into this world-directedness, despite one's own preference for security and peace. ...That suffering will accompany discipleship, that one will have to become a participant in the suffering of the crucified one – this is inevitable, in one form or another. ...All the same, suffering is not the object of discipleship, only its consequence. The object is greater and ever greater solidarity with the creation that God loves and, in Jesus Christ, seeks to redeem from within.⁴

Discipleship and sacrifice go hand in hand because standing with the hurting world involves sacrifice. Yet, this solidarity holds the potential for abundant life the world around, a life together marked by mutual love and attentiveness, a beloved community.

Dear church, as the living Christ invites us into discipleship again today, I ask: How will you die in order to live? **What sacrifice will you make for the sake of faith and love? Whatever shape your sacrifice takes, don't be afraid. Your cross is embraced by your Lord's, by which he draws us all to himself, and turns us toward each other.**

⁴ *The Cross in Our Context*, 54-5.