

Sunday September 3rd, 2017
Proper 17

PRAYER: O God, remember us! Send your memory spilling into the world! Visit us! Reveal your Word walking among us! And we shall greet one another with the expectant joy and trembling of friends too long apart. We stretch out our hands to you. O God, do not leave them empty! Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: “For what will it profit them, to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” Mark 8:36

PASTORAL PRAYER: Here we are again, O God. Gathered as your people, seeking to connect to the great mystery which is your presence. Our words seem so inadequate, our hearts seem so unworthy, but still we come. Not because we think we have the right, but because we have been granted access by your abiding grace. How marvelous it is to be enveloped by your love, to experience even the smallest crumbs of your life-giving peace. We know we could have so much more, than the mere crumbs but we hesitate, we question, we doubt and most of all we live in fear.

We fear: disease, economic loss, political turmoil, relationships and so much more. In fearing death and events that feel like a death, we have ended up fearing living. In fearing living, we have lost so much. We fear a stranger and therefore miss out on a new life enriching friendship. We fear the past so we can no longer embrace the present or look forward to the future. We are so self-conscious that we fear speaking out, or participating lest we embarrass ourselves, and therefore our experiences and opportunities for growth are stunted. We even fear for others so much that we become stumbling blocks keeping them from achieving personal growth.

How we long to be more like Jesus? To be able to set our face towards our destinies despite uncertainty, struggle, and even death. To be able to see that even in the face of the severest of challenges and threats, there is always life on the other side. Jesus told us that was why he came; to give life and life in abundance.

We would be remiss, o God, not to acknowledge that this week is a prime time for many people, especially children and young people to be overcome by fear. Walking into a new classroom, with a new teacher, and new classmates; sometimes, even in a new city, as older ones go off to university and college. We pray for our children, teens, and young adults who begin a new chapter of their life’s journey. Keep them safe, healthy, and as they learn, help their spirits also to grow as they gain more relational experience with you. For parents, grandparents, and friends of these students, help us to be ready to encourage, support, and walk along side them. Make us a regular reminder that no one need go alone on life’s road.

BENEDICTION: Take up your cross, quickened by the vision of the empty tomb and inspired by the fires of the Holy Spirit. Do not gladly bear a burden that diminishes your life, but seek the aid of God and neighbour to cast it

Sunday September 3rd, 2017
Proper 17

from you. Keep gladly only the charge that God has given you; fulfill that calling, and you will find your life. Amen.

Sunday September 3rd, 2017
Proper 17

Matthew 16:21-28
“God’s Great Plan”

One day a little old and very cute couple walked into the local fast food restaurant. The little old man went up to the counter and ordered their food. He brought back to the table a hamburger, a small order of fries, and a small drink. Carefully, the older gentleman sliced the hamburger in two, and then neatly divided the fries into two small piles. He sipped the drink and then passed it to his wife. She took a sip and passed it back.

A younger man at a nearby table observed this couple, and begin to feel sorry for them. He offered to buy them another meal, but the old man respectfully declined saying that they were used to sharing everything. The old man began to eat his food, while his wife sat still, not eating. The young man continued to watch the old couple feeling there was something he should be doing to help. As the old man finished his half of the burger and fries, the old lady still had not started eating hers. The young man couldn’t take it anymore. He asked, “Ma’am, why aren’t you eating?” The old lady looked up and politely said, pointing to the old man, “I’m waiting on the teeth.”

How many times have we watched someone else and wondered, why they are doing whatever they are doing, in the particular way they are doing it. You watch your neighbour cutting his lawn or trimming his hedge and you think to yourself, I would never do it that way. You watch a young parent with their child and you think; I would never raise my kid that way. You are a preacher on holidays visiting another church, hearing a different preacher and you think, I would never have spoke about that passage in that way.

Today’s gospel lesson is like one of those moments. We observe Jesus talking about what it means to be his followers, and we think to ourselves, I would never have done it that way. This is certainly why Peter was so outspoken in his opposition to Jesus talking about the inevitability of his suffering and death on the cross. Peter is in some ways saying, “You know Jesus, I wouldn’t have done it that way, and maybe I know better.”

Now to be fair, I think Peter was a just a bit unsettled that Jesus was so determined to see his future, in such a scary way. Peter knew that Jesus was the Messiah. In fact, he had just declared as such in the previous passage, but how Peter viewed the Messiah, and how Jesus viewed himself as the Messiah, were radically different. Peter bristled because of the implications of Jesus’ self-identification. If Jesus was to suffer and die because he is the Messiah, what does that mean for us who are his disciples?

Sunday September 3rd, 2017
Proper 17

Well Jesus sees the question coming and addresses it head on. "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.'" Now let's pause for a second and consider the implications of these words. I will be honest; these verses shake me to the core. Upon first glance, these verses aren't so bad, but the longer I ruminate among them, the more unraveled I get, and the more they start to play tricks on me. Deny yourselves. Take up your cross.

Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. This is easy enough to understand. If I am selfish with my life, I will lose my life; but if I am generous and give up my life, I will gain it. Therefore, I will be generous with my life, because I know that I want to gain it. But...wait. Then am I simply being generous for my own gain? To save my own neck? Aren't I simply wanting to save my life, which then means I'll lose it? It's a dizzying text and I am not quite sure what to do with it.

But I think there are two main ways people hear this text. Some hear it as a call to live a meager life, denying themselves of joy and fullness of life as a way of delayed gratification. The more I deny myself life's comforts here and now, the greater my reward will be in heaven. No pain, no gain. This is how God wants us to live. Others hear this text as justification, or reason, for the suffering that has already burrowed into their life. "This must be my cross to bear," people say, when faced with suffering that is just as hard to explain as it is to endure.

It paints the picture of a drill sergeant, AKA God, who is in the business of giving you more and more obstacles, and struggles in life, to see how long you can endure them. I am afraid that because of this text, abused spouses have stayed in their relationships too long. Living in terror each day. They stay because they think it is the cross God has called them to bear. So, they think they should just grin and bear it, trying to trust in a god who can seem so cruel.

If these are the only two ways to hear the text, then honestly, I want nothing to do with it. But what if there is another way of hearing this text? What if, this text is not about a call to a life of suffering, and denying one's self the pleasures in life, all so that one can receive a greater reward in heaven, as if God is simply playing a game with us? What if this text is also not about a reason for our suffering?

Sunday September 3rd, 2017
Proper 17

That God tests us by giving us all crosses to bear, and asking us to carry them to show our commitment and endurance of our faith. Instead, is it possible this challenging text is about not being afraid. Specifically; not being afraid of death. And not fearing the suffering that occurs in our lives that can feel so much like death. And the reason we are called to this way of thinking is because the moment we start to fear death, it's not long before we start to fear life too.

I think this was the case for Peter. Remember that just before this text in Matthew, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter is the one who steps forward and says, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." Jesus affirms Peter by saying, "Yes, blessed are you, Peter." The only problem is that Peter is expecting a different kind of Messiah than Jesus is.

In Peter's mind, the Messiah is one who comes in strength and power. One who will defeat the evil powers of the world. And as a follower of Jesus, he expects to be part of such a glorious battle, which he will win. So, when Jesus begins to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and undergo great suffering and death, it's no wonder that Peter cries out, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Suffering and death were not the future Peter envisioned for Jesus, but more importantly they weren't the future he envisioned for himself, either.

If Jesus must go to Jerusalem and face suffering and death, then as a follower of Jesus, doesn't that mean Peter must go and do the same? Peter was afraid for Jesus' life, but he was afraid for his own life too. The moment we start to fear death, it's not long before we start to fear life. I am not a psychiatrist or psychologist, and Nancy Carroll is better qualified to unpack this, but I wonder how much of our anxiety stems from this fear of death spilling into a fear of living.

Our existential anxiety, as Emmanuel Kant described it, spills over into many aspects of our lives. For example. Years ago, while living in Brownsburg Quebec, one of the local characters I had the privilege to meet, was an elderly fellow named Jimmy. Now Jimmy was a very kind soul, who believed in Jesus, but his life was dictated by fear. How do I know this? Easy! He demonstrated it by how he lived.

Jimmy was well known in the community for squirreling away every dollar he could. He undertook as many small jobs as he could to earn more money. To say he lived frugally, was an understatement. His home was literally a slapped together shack, and when he died it was so decrepit that it was immediately condemned and torn down. Although it was demolished very carefully, because he had stuffed thousands of dollars in the walls of his shack.

Sunday September 3rd, 2017
Proper 17

Jimmy lived in fear. He was a terribly afraid of running out of money, even though he had hundreds of thousands of dollars in the bank. Even the purchase of soap and paying for hot water was too extravagant, so Jimmy rarely bathed. He never drove, walking everywhere he went; sometimes for several kilometers. He found ingenious ways to get free food at funeral receptions and church potlucks. Life was hard for him, but it was so because he lived in fear.

Jesus is in search of life. Fullness of life. For all of us. Did you catch that in the text? That Jesus is in search of life? I didn't see it at first either. Or if I did, I didn't know what to make of it. Listen again... "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, and chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, (But the verse doesn't end here. What does it go on to say?) and *on the third day be raised.*"

See that. And on the third day be raised. Resurrection. Jesus isn't going to Jerusalem in search of death, but in search of life. New life. Fullness of life. Resurrected life. So, could it be that this text is about not fearing death, and those suffering moments in life that can feel like death, because once you start to fear death, it isn't long before you start to fear life. I know that it can sound trivial to say, but in life there is pain. There is suffering.

So, when Jesus asks his followers to take up their crosses and follow him into Jerusalem, it is not because Jesus wants to give us pain and suffering, but because Jesus knows we already *have* pain and suffering. Pain and suffering are already part of our lives. Part of the world. And God loves the world. That's what John 3:16 says. So, Jesus says, take up your cross and follow me, we will go through this thing together in search of life.

So, we take up our crosses because frankly, there are crosses to be taken up, and what else is there to do? The only other option is to deny that there are any crosses in this world, which as far as I am concerned is simply to fall into a fear of death, and thus a fear of life. But to take up one's cross is to embrace both the pain and suffering of the world, and to embrace the hope of discovering life within it.

I need to be clear here. A full life, an abundant life, is not one that is absent of suffering. Christ never promised you that, nor will you find that kind of life. Rather, Jesus offers us an existence that faces our suffering with the courage to search for life; resurrected life, in the midst of our struggles and pain. Jesus is in the business of bring about life in the midst of death. He truly is the Resurrection and the Life.

The path, as disciples of Jesus, is ours to choose, I guess. But remember, try to save your life and you will lose it. To be afraid of death is to be afraid of

Sunday September 3rd, 2017
Proper 17

life. When you fear death, you can walk right past the person in the park looking for gas money, and miss the surge of life that comes from helping a stranger. When you fear death, you can act as if the cancer isn't there, and miss the life-giving experience of telling your children and grandkids all the stories you've wanted to tell them before your heart beats its last.

So, take up your cross if you choose to do so, whatever it may be. Depression. Job loss. Addiction. Busyness. Sadness. Why take up your cross? Well because we have crosses in our lives, and what else are we supposed to do? And as you walk in the crowd of others following Jesus and carrying their crosses, you just might bump into a person who has a cross like yours, and who has found a way to carry it that makes it less painful. Immediately, you can feel the relief in your shoulders and your knees. But also in your soul too. So, you pass the helpful advice along and you keep going.

There is one more lesson here that I would remiss if I didn't point it out briefly. Jesus tells Peter that he is a "Stumbling Block". He means that Peter is attempting to keep Jesus from reaching his true destiny, just as Satan tried to do in the temptation stories, thus his name appears here. I fear that we too can be a stumbling block to others, who must for their own search for abundant life, must pick up their cross.

So, in our kindness, actually more accurately, out of our own fear, we try to dismiss others pain and suffering. We don't want to talk about it. We try and dismiss it by saying that we know someone who has it worse, or think our cross is more important than the other soul. We tell others they don't need to strive or walk the hard road, and in so doing this, we believe we are preserving life, when we are actually denying life.

Philip Island, in Victoria Australia, plays host to one of the greatest nature experiences possible. On the shores of Philip Island are the burrows of thousands upon thousands of fairy penguins, extraordinarily cute little birds that stand only 30cm or so tall. Every morning the adult penguins head out to sea to catch fish. At the end of the day they return to land to bring back food for their chicks.

Watching them get from the water to their burrows is both funny and exhilarating. The penguins surf in on the waves, then gather in groups at the water's edge. Their burrows are 100 metres or so away, with the open space of the sandy beach between them. All of a sudden, a group of penguins will take off, waddling as fast as their little legs will carry them across the beach.

But then, having got 10 or 20 metres they'll suddenly turn around and waddle back to the water. They wait, then try again. One group makes it, but another performs this strange ritual of turning back. And on it goes, through the dying light of day, until finally the penguins have all crossed the beach

Sunday September 3rd, 2017
Proper 17

and met their chicks in their burrows. What's going on? Why the strange stop-start-return ritual? The answer's quite simple. At sea, the birds are fast swimmers, able to dive deep.

At sea, they're safe from predators such as eagles and hawks and dogs and cats. In their burrows, they're safe below ground. But on the open beach, they're vulnerable and exposed. On the beach, they can only waddle slowly and are easy pickings for predators. And so, as they cross the beach, the moment they see a shadow, or something out of the corner of their eye, they turn back and race for the safety of the water.

It seems that we humans are a lot like those fairy penguins. When confronted with challenging situations, we find ourselves like the penguins standing at the water's edge. We know where we've got to go, we know we've got to get across that beach to get back to the burrow, but it can be so terrifying. When we step out of the water, and start waddling across the beach, we leave our safety zone behind, we're in no-man's land where it's dangerous, uncertain and where we're vulnerable.

Jesus is inviting us to cross the beach, to pick up our cross, to risk all because he knows, and he wants us to know that it is the only way to truly find life.