

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 17 A
Jeremiah 15:15-21
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

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Today we get to reflect on one of the most intriguing and challenging New Testament passages. Over the years I have resisted this scripture almost as vigorously as Peter the disciple did! But it really holds the key to living as God's people.

Last Sunday in Matthew's gospel, we heard how Peter was the first person to call Jesus Messiah. Peter *got* it! Peter shouted out the truth that Jesus was more than just an incredible teacher – Jesus was God's chosen one, anointed for God's great work. Of course Peter had no idea what that meant. And when Jesus began to explain that being Messiah included suffering and death -- *Peter shut Jesus up. Peter silenced the Messiah!*

Oh, Peter. Well if he hadn't done it, we would have done it ourselves. It was the knee-jerk reaction of someone trying to protect a loved one. The mother who jumps down onto subway tracks to save her toddler. The father who dives out of a boat to rescue a drowning teenager. It's a gut reaction. "God forbid anything should happen to you, Jesus! / forbid it!" You gotta love Peter's passion.

But this wasn't God-language, it was human language Peter spoke. Sincere but so naive. Because this Messiah wasn't meant to protect his own safety, this Savior came to wade right into the middle of human suffering in order to bring the grace of God, the love of God, into every place of human pain. This Messiah had to experience all of human life's beauty and agony, for God to work the ultimate miracle of saving love -- so not even death would be a barrier to our Creator's healing presence.

We humans want so badly to save and protect our lives-- but Jesus shows everyone how true life is found in the process of giving life away. *"For those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it."*

This has often seemed like a difficult riddle to me. *To save your life is to lose it... to lose it is to find it.* It's intimidating. I much prefer to play things safe. I carry insurance. I obey traffic laws. I try to eat healthy. I don't take unnecessary risks. I don't like the sound of losing my life, much less taking up a cross to follow Jesus! I'd like it a lot better if faith in God was like a cloak of protection, a guarantee against hard times. But that's not how it works. The truth is, *stuff happens.*

Trouble comes to every one of us, somehow, sometime. Trouble doesn't come from God. Trouble is part of the human condition. But we do have an enduring promise. When trouble comes, Jesus says, *I will walk through it with you. Because I've been there. I've been all the way through it, and you will never be alone. I am always at your side, in the*

fires and the floods and the tears and the laughter. In the celebrations and at the cross. I am with you to the end, and beyond.

The Messiah doesn't play it safe. Which makes God's love the most durable, the most resilient, the most feisty and spirited love anyone can ever experience. Love that has gone through death and been raised again to life – that's sturdy love. And here's what that means.

No matter what abuse or hatred may be directed at you, you will always live entirely secure in the Creator's kindness. God's goodness owns your heart and soul, and holds your spirit fast.

No matter what failures you experience or how much self-doubt may unsettle you, you are completely accepted, just as you are. You are worthy, valued, treasured, you are entirely precious in God's sight.

No matter what sin you tangle with, God's grace is real and dependable. God's unconditional love redeems you. You can count on waking up every morning fully forgiven in the perfect compassion of Christ, and blessed to begin again.

No matter what illness or heartbreak comes, you are held in God's hand now and always.

This is the good news we live our lives by. Our Creator's love breathes into every atom that exists, and breathes into every cell of who we are. And God's love is meant to be passed along, and given away. Because God has first loved us, we are set free to give away our lives in love.

Jesus said, *"... those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake – for love's sake -- will find it."*

This really is the mystery at the heart of our existence, how giving love away, freely sharing of ourselves, is the way we come to experience the life that truly is life.

We don't give our lives away to earn God's love – we give our lives away in *response* to God's love.

I'll say that again. We don't give our lives away to earn God's love or prove ourselves. Having received God's kindness, we are set free to lose our lives in love.

And the truth is that *"losing your life"* is always part of genuine human relationships. Nobody can fully participate in a relationship if their energy and emotions are locked up tight. If you want to be close to another person, you must become vulnerable to some extent. Share of yourself, let your guard down, commit your loyalty, throw in your lot with them. Parents give themselves away out of commitment to their children. In a healthy marriage, spouses open their hearts to give and take, they influence each other. It's true that you lose something of yourself to the other person. And yet in losing

something, at the same time you find something even more precious in the relationship that forms.

Christian community is meant to be a place where loving relationships can flourish. It isn't always easy. Churches are full of stresses and struggles like everywhere else. But we have a particular gift – our common calling to follow Jesus' way.

In the beautiful passage we read from Romans, Saint Paul urged the congregation to “let love be genuine.” Genuine love has no place for manipulation or abuse. It has no place for prejudice or revenge. Genuine love is mutual affection, given and received. As we try to practice this love in Christian community, the ripples flow outward to influence others.

Saint Paul emphasized the Greek word *agape*, which means self-giving love, love that gives itself away, love that reaches out to actively serve others. Exactly the love Jesus spoke of – and lived. And in just 12 verses, Paul described at least 30 specific ways to live out *agape* love: *be genuine, be hospitable, be generous, weep with those who weep, live in harmony, associate with the lowly.* It is such a rich scripture! I invite you to take these verses home, spend time with them, reflect on which phrases or words are speaking to your life at this time.

For me, it's the closing verses that challenge me. How does self-giving love respond when people hurt us and do us wrong? Our instinct is to retaliate. When somebody hits, you hit back. When someone betrays you, you try to even the score. But St. Paul echoes Jesus himself:

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...
Do not repay anyone evil for evil...*

That is to say, it's not up to us to fight back or retaliate – if it's anyone's place, it would be God's. God has all kinds of ways to bring people around to the love they were created for. We are meant to trust God and let go of any thought of revenge.

I want to be clear that we will never cave in to abuse. We will be strong in setting boundaries to keep ourselves safe, and we will support others in staying safe. If someone is in a dangerous relationship or situation, we'll do all we can to help them get free. This is what strong and determined love does.

And I believe this teaching is meant to preserve our spirits in the midst of dangerous situations. It's not up to us to fight back or retaliate. Hostility is not what we're made for. We do not belong to hatred or revenge. We belong to God. We belong to resilient love. We do give up something when we let go of our right to retaliate – but we gain much more. We stake our lives on the deeper reality of abiding love.

In love, God gives us strength to persevere in difficult situations. In love, God gives us Spirit to guide our choices. In love, God gives us each other to help find a way when there seems to be no way. And along the way, maybe we discover that being God's person – being a grateful child of God – is not about getting a cloak of protection. Instead, it is about God lovingly equipping us to live in this perfectly imperfect world of ours. To live this life that is sometimes treacherous but always contains joy. To live this life with genuine love, self-giving love, which multiplies goodness in a truly sacred way. Amen.