

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38

Rev. Nathan Anderson
Lent 2 B
February 25, 2018

In the Gospel story we just read, Jesus reproaches Peter, saying: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." It was a shocking statement for Peter to hear... and a challenging one for us to consider as well. Isn't it human nature to think of one's worldly needs, as well as the needs of others? We are materialistic enough to protect what we have, and hope to be good providers to anyone we consider as dependent. We don't normally consider this as something to be criticized, unless we become selfish.

I don't think Peter was selfish when he expressed his concern to Jesus. Christ spoke of rejection, suffering, and crucifixion. Peter likely wanted to reassure Jesus how he wouldn't let such things happen to Him. Peter was as human as the rest of us, not wanting his friend to dwell on painful topics as death, execution, and betrayal. Life isn't all gloom and doom. Let's "eat, drink and be merry!" It's actually a quote from Ecclesiastes 8:15. Isaiah 22:13 declares: "Let's eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die." There's a cheery thought.

I guess our humanity does tend to suppress death's reality. Most of you will remember the television series M*A*S*H. There was a constant verbal battle raging between Hawkeye and Frank Burns. Hawkeye was cynical, razor-tongued and unrepentantly non-conformist. Frank was all-military, self-absorbed, and hypercritical of his subordinates. As is often true about those who criticize others, Frank rarely acknowledged his own faults. In one episode, the camp is under siege by a sniper. As bullets fly back and forth across the compound, Hawkeye and Frank lament the persistent presence of death, especially in war. At one point Hawkeye says, "Everyone dies, Frank." To which Frank replies, "You think they'd give officers a break."

The absurdity of the remark is what makes it funny. Why would officers deserve special dispensation from death? It takes an inflated ego to consider others as expendable while seeking personal immunity. Perhaps we each wish we would not have to face the death of loved ones, and hope God will give us a break in not having to suffer. We're human.

Jesus' disciples had just learned He is the Messiah. But before they could rejoice, Jesus shocks them by saying He will go to Jerusalem and be killed. None of the popular hopes for the Messiah's arrival included any scenario about having to die. Christ, however, said, "If you want to become My followers, take up your cross and follow Me."

First-century Jews knew about crosses. Rome had recently squelched a Jewish uprising, crucifying 1,000 Israelites. When Jesus brought up the cross, the disciples wanted nothing to do with it. Let's not go there! But Jesus said, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for My sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

This was a watershed moment, challenging Christ's followers to look at the sacrificial demands of discipleship. Buried in the meaning of Jesus' death is the key to how we are supposed to live our lives as followers. He drives home the point how death is part of the deal

for all of us, disciples or not. Accepting this reality sets us free to live as God intends. Some people try so hard not to die, they don't really live.

The meaning of life is found in how we give it away. When we discover a mission and purpose larger than the scope of our own survival or comfort, we discover freedom... freedom from fear, freedom for risk, freedom to love more deeply. If I spend my life running from death, there is only time for taking care of me. My world will shrink to the point of insignificance.

Jesus challenges us to pick up our cross and follow Him. Funny thing about crosses, they seem to choose us more than we choose them. Might a cross to bear help us discover a mission in our life's purpose? Could our suffering from abuse, illness or addiction somehow inspire compassion and a commitment to bring healing and justice in protecting others?

One of our members sent me an email story about an elderly man named Carl. He volunteered to take care of the small garden of an inner city church. Members were concerned about his safety in the changing neighborhood with its violence, gangs, and drug activity. At age 87, he was just finishing his watering for the day when three gang members approached him. Ignoring their attempt to intimidate him, Carl asked, "Would you like a drink from the hose?" As Carl offered the hose, two men grabbed Carl's arm, throwing him down. As the hose snaked crazily over the ground, dousing everything in its way, Carl's assailants stole his retirement watch and wallet, and then fled.

The minister came running to help. "Carl, are you okay? Are you hurt?" Carl sighed, shaking his head. "Just some punk kids. I hope they'll wise-up someday." He picked up the hose in his wringing wet clothes and adjusted the nozzle. The concerned pastor asked, "Carl, what are you doing?" "I've got to finish my watering. It's been very dry lately." The pastor marveled at the calm spirit of this man. It happened again 3 weeks later, and Carl would still finish his chores.

The summer was quickly fading into fall. Carl was tilling the soil when he was startled by someone's approach from behind. He stumbled and fell into some evergreen branches. As he struggled to regain his footing, the tall leader of his summer tormentors reached down. Carl braced himself, but heard: "Don't worry, old man, I'm not gonna' hurt you this time." The young man offered his tattooed and scarred hand to Carl. As he helped the old man get up, he pulled a crumpled bag from his pocket. "What's this?" Carl asked. "It's your stuff," the man explained. "Even the money in your wallet." "I don't understand," Carl said. "Why would you help me now?"

The man shifted his feet, embarrassed and ill at ease. "I learned something from you", he said. "My gang picked on you because you were old and we knew we could do it. But every time we did something to you, instead of yelling and fighting back, you tried to give us a drink. You didn't hate us for hurting you. I couldn't sleep after we stole your stuff, so here it is back." He paused for an awkward moment. "It's my way of saying thanks for straightening me out, I guess." He walked away. Carl gingerly opened the sack in his hands. He took out his retirement watch and put it back on his wrist. Opening his wallet, he checked for his wedding photo with his bride from long ago.

Carl died one cold day after Christmas. Many people attended his funeral in spite of the weather. The pastor noticed a tall young man he didn't know sitting quietly by himself in a back corner of the church. The sermon described Carl's garden as a lesson in life and stewardship.

In the spring, a flyer went up on the church door. It read: "Person needed to care for Carl's garden." A young man with scarred and tattooed hands showed up at the church office, saying, "I believe this is my job, if you'll have me." Over the next several years, he kept the garden as beautiful as he thought Carl would have kept it. One day he told the minister he couldn't care for the garden any longer. He and his wife had just become parents, and now his energies would focus on his son... Carl.

Life tempts us to give up, feeling hopeless and helpless, to give in to fear or hate. The Cross doesn't teach us to give up or to give in. It teaches us how to give sacrificially, but in ways which enrich our lives, and bring healing to the lives of others. It frees us from fear and hate, granting a faith to believe the way of the Cross really does lead others and ourselves to God's Kingdom.

Amen.