

**13 Pentecost  
August 30, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

Today marks the 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday of St. Cyprian's broadcasting our worship service online either by live-streaming, or by recording the service beforehand. For almost six months we have been living in response to the COVID-19 coronavirus ... changing the patterns and practices of our work, worship, and social interactions. While we may be becoming more accustomed to frequent handwashing, masks, and distancing, we continue to face unfamiliar fears and frustrations in our everyday lives. In spite of the efforts of many to arrest the spread of the coronavirus, we continue to watch both COVID-19 cases and death counts increase nationally at a distressing rate. And, I believe that many of us are experiencing some degree of "pandemic fatigue" ... the emotional and physical exhaustion resulting from the stress of uncertainty, anxiety, and change to daily routines.

All of this is compounded by the modifications we have had to make to numerous support structures in our lives. For us ... as members of St. Cyprian's ... that is particularly true of the worship, fellowship, and outreach gatherings that frame the spiritual disciplines of our faith. We yearn to be together ... to worship as a community ... to share in our ministry to the world around us ... and to share fully in the Eucharistic celebration ... to be fed by word and sacrament. The adjustments we have made to stay connected and provide spiritual nurture through online services continue to feed us, but they are not what we were used to, and may not be what we desire ... yet, they are our attempt at coping with the realities of this difficult time in creative and faithful ways.

The two most frequently expressed longings I hear are for personal contact, and for the reception of the Eucharistic elements. I know how difficult it is not to have available to us the regular companionship of others, and the sacramental communion of our holy bread and wine. In the midst of our separation, I have had the blessing of seeing some of you in person from time to time as you come to the church to drop off food for Dining With Dignity, or contribute items to be distributed at the Ecumenical Food Pantry, or to come pray and meditate in the sanctuary. I see some of you on the Zoom Coffee Hour, or the Zoom Book Study. But, I want you to know that I miss all of you. Moreover, I want you to know that even if you haven't heard from me by one way or another, I continue to pray for each of you.

I don't know how much longer we will worship this way ... whether it is another six weeks or another six months ... but the safety of all persons in this congregation is my

primary concern and highest priority. Even when we begin to have in-person worship we will also live-stream our service online for those who choose to stay home.

Part of me cringes when I listen carefully to our Gospel reading this morning. I really don't want to preach about suffering and loss, about denying ourselves and taking up our crosses, about losing our lives in order to save them. During these days that feel apocalyptic already, I wish I could focus on a more soothing passage of Holy Scripture. "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden," or, "He leads me besides the still waters," or, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." However, this is exactly the pivot we can't make in response to this week's Gospel ... it is an attempt to turn away from the angry sanction that Peter receives. Somehow, even during the painful, frightening days we find ourselves in, Jesus tells it like it is.

As Matthew describes the scene, Jesus has just praised and blessed Peter for recognizing him as the Messiah. Now Jesus begins to show his disciples that the Messiah must undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, be killed, and on the third day be raised.

We Christians know the whole story of the resurrection ... year upon year we celebrate Easter. But, just try to imagine those disciples hearing this for the first time. What would happen if we shook ourselves out of our knowledge of this story for a few moments, and heard Jesus's words as his first listeners heard them two thousand years ago?

The disciples' great hope ... cultivated over the three years they followed Jesus ... was that he would lead them in a military revolution and overthrow their Roman oppressors. They had seen his miracles, and witnessed firsthand his charismatic ability to draw curious crowds. The disciples had heard him proclaim aloud the arrival of a new order ... what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. He was the disciples' heaven-sent future ... their cherished dream ... their chance at liberation.

So imagine how disorienting ... how ludicrous ... it was for the disciples to hear from the mouth of Jesus that their would-be champion was determined to walk straight into a death trap? To give himself over to humiliation and disgrace ... to surrender without a fight ... to give himself up to a common criminal's death?

Peter ... as impetuous and clueless as ever ... scolds Jesus for his gruesome prediction. Then Jesus ... in what might be the strongest rebuke in all of Scripture ... puts Peter in his place. "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

That is when Jesus turns to the crowds and captures the essence of his Gospel message in just two sentences: "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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

So, what does it mean to deny ourselves? Living in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century American culture, how might we deny ourselves so that we will thrive ... here and now? If we take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... and obviously he took this very seriously ... how shall we save our lives by losing them for the gospel’s sake in 21st century America?

Right now, we are asking these questions in the context of a global pandemic that shows no signs of letting up. We are asking these questions in the context of police brutality, white supremacy, racial injustice, and gross economic inequality. We are asking these questions in the context of global warming, worldwide mass extinction of flora and fauna, droughts, and heat waves. We are asking these questions in the context of the fires destroying forests and towns in California, and the disastrous remains of category 4 Hurricane Laura in Louisiana and Texas.

So the question becomes this ... What are we willing to lose in these times? And what do we stand to gain? What would Jesus say ... I wonder ... to the multi-million dollar industries that invite us to deny our mortality through entertainment, leisure, real estate, sports cars, and expensive toys of all kinds? What would Jesus say to a global corporate economy that rapes and pillages the planet, instead of stewarding it with gentleness and care? What would he say to a notion of personal liberty that encourages us to bask in our “rights,” instead of accepting our civic responsibilities? What would Jesus say to our frightened hearts, that prioritizes self-protection over so much else that matters in this life?

What if Jesus’ call is for us to stop clutching at this life so desperately? To step out of the vicious cycles of denial, acquisition, terror, and violence that seeks to cheat death, but in fact robs us of the abundant life Jesus came to give us? What would it look like ... in this time and place ... to lay down our fears so that others might live? To willingly set aside our own interests ... and our own liberties ... so that we can prioritize what Jesus called the "great commandments" ... to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves?

To take up a cross is to stand in the center of the world’s pain ... not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and then sneak away ... but to dwell there ... to live in that suffering with the other ... to identify ourselves with those who are aching, weeping, screaming, and dying ... to insist that our comfort isn't worth it unless everyone ... including the least and the lost ... can share in it, too.

Taking up a cross means recognizing the crucified Jesus in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us ... and pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating their pain no matter what it costs. It means accepting ... against all the lies of our culture ... that we are all going to die. It means following up that courageous acceptance with the most

important question we can ask ... given our inescapable death, how will we choose to spend what is left of our God-given lives?

Shall we hoard it in fear, or give it away in hope? Shall we protect ourselves with numbness and apathy, or experience the abundant life Jesus offers to those who ache, weep, and bleed alongside the world's suffering? Shall we, like Peter, push suffering away at all costs ... and in doing so, push Jesus away, too? Or, shall we take seriously what Jesus took seriously, and choose to head down the only road that actually leads to abundant and eternal life?

Jesus died the humiliating death of the unjustly accused ... the same fate as too many black men and women of our time. Jesus willingly took the violence, the contempt, the apathy, and the arrogance of this world, and absorbed them all into his body. He chose to be the victim, the scapegoat, the sacrifice. He refused to waver in his message of universal love, grace, and liberation, knowing full well that the message would cost him his life. He declared solidarity for all time with those who are abandoned, oppressed, accused, imprisoned, beaten, mocked, and murdered. He took an instrument of torture and turned it into a vehicle of hospitality and communion for all people, everywhere. He loved and he loved and he loved, all the way to the end.

Jesus rebukes Peter so harshly in this week's Gospel precisely because the temptation Peter holds out is so alluring ... so deceptive ... and so insidious. The enticement is to say to one's self, "You don't have to do the hard thing. You don't have to take this faith business so seriously. You don't have to give up your own rights, privileges, and comforts. You don't have to die."

The truth is, no, we don't ... we don't have to lose our life to save it. There is a spectator version of Christianity out there, and plenty of people decide to live it. But, let's not pretend for one moment that it's the version Jesus is calling us to live. Let's not fool ourselves into assuming that faith-on-the-sidelines will grant us safety, immunity, joy, or blessing ... because it will not. Those who try to save their lives will lose them. And, those who lose their lives will save them.

I really didn't want to preach about suffering and loss, about denying ourselves and taking up our crosses, about losing our lives in order to save them. During these days that feel apocalyptic already, I wish I could have focused on a more soothing passage of Holy Scripture. However, this is exactly the pivot I couldn't make in response to this week's Gospel ... to do so would mean that I, too, would be vulnerable to the angry words that Jesus had for Peter. Somehow, even during the painful, frightening days we find ourselves in, Jesus tells it like it is.

Amen.

