

Yr. A, Proper 17
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St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1657 Words

Lessons: Jeremiah 15:15-21
Psalm 26:1-8
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

Within one brief conversation, Simon Peter went from being the foundational Rock of the Church to the stumbling block of the Church's Messiah. Exalted in one breath; rebuked in the next. Things can change so quickly and so drastically in this life that we struggle to maintain our vision of who we are and where we are headed.

Jesus says, "I'm headed toward great suffering and certain death, and—on the third day—I will be raised." St. Peter stopped listening after those first two buzz words—suffering and death. Just like we do.

Suffering and death? Who signs up for that? That's where most of us begin looking for a graceful exit...or even a *disgraceful* exit. It's time to take stock when your leader begins talking about denying yourself—actually denying your own desires, hopes, privileges, and dreams instead of fulfilling them.

What are *you* actually willing to give up for Christ's sake? Your time? Money? Your life? Most of the really *valuable things* we give up in this life are losses we did not *choose* to surrender. We all experience a succession of losses beyond our control, and they are often among the worst sufferings and deaths.

"If there's one thing the Irish do right, its death," says Mary Kate O'Flanagan in a story she recently told as part of The Moth Storytelling Project. "(Others) say 'I'm sorry for your loss,' but the Irish say, 'I'm standing with you'—and they mean it literally. First, neighbors come with enough food for an army, and then an army comes!"

Mary Kate describes a traditional Irish wake as one in which hundreds of people might gather over time to sit together, pray together, sing songs and tell stories together. She speaks from personal experience.

"My parents raised 6 daughters," she says, "They taught us there is...nothing we *could not do* if we worked at it."

I love what she credits as her greatest asset. "My parents gave us what we needed to walk through this world, that is—5 sisters each!" And then Mary Kate admits that their family motto should probably be "Underprepared, but overconfident."

This motto also describes Simon Peter and the other disciples. Let's face it, there was nothing about fishing or tax collecting or any of their prior vocations to prepare them for the weight of following Jesus and becoming the very foundation of his Church.

Simon Peter *also* exuded overconfidence—speaking up first *about* Jesus, climbing mountains *with* Jesus, walking on water *beside* Jesus. St. Peter had the confidence to say and do *anything, as long as Jesus was nearby.*

But the suffering and death of his Messiah? That changed the arithmetic. That changed *everything*. Like us, Peter was at a loss to imagine how he might possibly carry on. It was a loss he was unwilling to surrender by choice.

This is how it was with Mary Kate and her sisters. Their father died suddenly and unexpectedly. She describes how they drew comfort from their Irish traditions, *except one.*

“The undertaker said, ‘I need to know the names of the 6 men who will carry the coffin.’

‘There’s six of us, daughters,’ I said.

‘Ok, so your husbands then?’

Mary Kate’s sister chimed in, ‘No, she means *we* are going to carry the coffin.’

‘Isn’t that *lovely* you would want to do that, but it’s heavier than you think. It’s unwieldy. Better to let the men do this *for you*.’”

A third sister said, “No, it would be better if you let us do it.”

The undertaker *could not* take ‘yes’ for an answer. “How about if we wheel it,” he proposed, “and the six of you walk beside the coffin like a guard of honor.”

A fourth sister put an end to the conversation. “Shoulder high!” she exclaimed. “My father will be carried from this house shoulder high, and by us!”

This. This is today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus is challenging us to carry our cross, shoulder high! “*What is my cross?*” you ask?

Your cross is whatever burdens you for the sake of justice and righteousness. “Hate what is evil,” writes St. Paul. “Hold fast to what is good.”

Your cross is whatever is hard to say for the sake of truth and mercy. “Bless those who persecute you,” writes St. Paul. “Bless, and do not curse them.”

Your cross is whatever *you find* hard to do for the sake of love. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep...Do not be haughty...associate with the lowly... live peaceably...”

St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 12, reveals in crisp, clear detail what *your cross* looks like, the one Jesus invited you to carry—shoulder high—for his sake, wherever you are and wherever you go. It can be heavier than you think. It’s unwieldy.

And so it was with Mary Kate and her five sisters. Although they had the strength to carry the weight, they faced another problem. This is the moment in the story when she discloses the substantial height disparity between her siblings—two are five feet tall, two are about 5’6”, and two are 5’10”. “And so there was quite a considerable tilt to the coffin,” she chuckles. But *they did it*—shoulder high—from the house to the church and from the Church to the grave.

One of their aunts said this: “Of *all* the stories told, the most eloquent testimony to the best part of that good man’s life was watching the six *strong* women he raised carrying him to his rest.”

The same truth applies to us. “Of *all* the stories told about Jesus, the most *eloquent testimony* to the best part of *that* good man’s life will be the strong disciples who carry the weight of the cross *in the present*—people like you who have the grace to glorify Christ in our own day.

The poor and hungry, the sick and suffering, the lonely and broken-hearted—they are all looking and listening for eloquent testimony to the best part of Godly life...of Godly love.

The call of a Christian disciple is not simply to carry your own weight and mind your own business, with friendliness for your friends and ignorance of those in need. The Church's authentic call is to carry nothing *less* than the weight of the world God so *loves* that *he gave up* his only Son.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is asking for just a little reciprocity in this divine: human relationship of sacrificial love and devotion. ...Which brings us back to the challenging standards Jesus is setting: How much privilege are we actually willing to self-deny for Christ's sake? How much burden are we actually willing to take up for Christ's sake?

I know this is not good timing. A lot of us feel like we don't have a lot of discretionary time or energy or treasure that we can afford to give up right now. We may feel like we don't have enough strength to carry any additional burdens right now. It's normal to feel this way. It's the way the disciples felt when *their world* got turned upside down.

It's how Mary Kate O'Flanagan felt after her father's burial. "In the weeks and months that followed," she says. "I discovered that my sisters and I were not strong women. We were women who had a *source of strength* taken from us, and each one of us bogged down in our own private grief" Doesn't that sound familiar?

Mary Kate recognizes how the bonds that tied her sisters together were *loosening* because seeing one another only reminded them of their terrible loss, and so they began to avoid each other.

Dear people, we are hard-wired to avoid suffering and death. We'll do most anything or neglect most anyone in order to subdue the pain and grief that comes from loss. It is *so easy* to get stuck in that fear and loneliness...*like St. Peter did*. He could not hear the rest of Jesus' prophesy, the *rest of the story*. For Jesus *also* said, "on the 3rd day, I will be raised."

The Good News of this Gospel is that the *very nature* of God is life which cannot be extinguished, hope which will not be abandoned, and love that is stronger than death. And we *get to share* this Godly life...and hope...and love. We get to see, hear, and share this *eloquent testimony* for the glory of God and for the blessing of other people.

Six months into their grief, Mary Kate received a call from her sister, Rebecca, who had traveled far away from home. Rebecca confessed, "Last night I looked up and said, 'Dad, I can't go on if you don't exist. I need a sign. And this morning my phone beeped and said, 'you have one new message *from dad*.'"

"Do you really think dad sent you a message from beyond the grave?" asked Mary Kate.

Rebecca said, "No, it's the last message he sent before he died, but it came through again."

"Well, what did it say?"

"It said, 'I'm home now Rebecca, you can call whenever you want.'" Rebecca asked her sister, "Do we have the audacity to believe it was a sign?"

To which Mary Kate responded, "I dare you *not* to believe."

Most of us don't get sensational signs like this to comfort us in our griefs, but we do have a message from beyond the grave...of Jesus. We believe, as St. Peter came to believe, that the rest of the story was true. God's life cannot be extinguished. God's hope will not be abandoned. And God's love is stronger than death.

Jesus summarized this Good News in his final words, recorded at the end of Matthew's Gospel. They are the words of our message from beyond his empty grave.

“Remember,” he said. “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”¹

Amen.

¹ Matthew 28:20