

Losing Life to Find It

Laura Smith Conrad

September 3, 2017 Ord 22A

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

Remind of last week's text- Peter professes that Jesus is the Messiah, son of the living God. Peter given the keys to the kingdom and will be the rock on which Jesus builds the church. Peter goes from building block to a stumbling block, from Rock to Satan. The conversation with Jesus and his disciples continues...

Matthew 16:21-28

16:21 From that time on, 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, and on the third day be raised.

16:22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

16:23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

16:24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

16:25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

16:26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

16:27 "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

16:28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Proclamation of the Word

We left worship last Sunday to the news that Hurricane Harvey was continuing to dump inches upon inches of rain upon a whole region in Texas. To date almost 50 inches of rain has fallen, almost twice as much as SC experienced in the so-called 1000 year flood of 2015- from Columbia to the coast. In 1016, our Sr. Highs went to Georgetown to help our neighbors. They witnessed that our SC neighbors, particularly the poorest, are continuing to recover. The human suffering we have seen this week is enormous. It will be a long recovery.

I know some of you have family members and friends there. Some you have heard from. Others you have not. We continue to lift up our neighbors in Texas serving and suffering there. We remember Judi Cundiff's parents, Nancy Spitler's cousin, Claudette Bennett's daughter, Hack Trammell's brother. I am sure there are more connections. A reminder that we those hurting are all someone's son, daughter, mother, brother.

As is the case in these times, we have witnessed God-given gifts of human kindness, bravery, and generosity as well. There was the firefighter who carried an elderly woman on his back, the furniture store owner who opened his store to the military for a respite and to the folks in his neighborhood, the National Guard, FEMA agents, and the countless and tireless volunteers. One of the best photos Chuck said was the half a dozen guys pushing a truck through the flood which showed people pulling together, pushing forward.

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is the way our church responds in these situations. Every Easter we collect the *One Great Hour of Sharing* offering which provides for immediate need and so that churches in the local Houston area are already equipped and supported. Our additional designated funds for Hurricane Harvey go to the churches and trained PDA responders, regular church folks, for supplies and support. We can give to the situation now. We can stand in the gap, G.A.P. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance asks us to **Give. Act. Pray-** to stand in the GAP. Our prayers can turn to action. And it will take years to recover, and as we know some will never recover. We through PDA have committed to being there for 3-5 years working with the Presbytery of the New Covenant.

I received this t-shirt while helping with Hurricane Katrina clean up in d'Iberville, MS 10 years ago. We went to serve- hanging dry wall in homes and mucking out a local small business a year after the hurricane. Maybe you have seen such destruction up close as well.

The motto of PDA is "out of chaos, hope" because we witness to the living God who brings hope in places of despair and destruction. And that witness looks like fresh drywall, a local business functioning, a hot meal and clean water...That is what hope looks like.

Why do we do this???

We worship Jesus who is God in the flesh, so we care about earthly human things such as these. In our faith, what affects the body, affects the spirit, and vice-versa. We are whole people of God.

Jesus never promised there would be no suffering. In fact, he told his disciples it was the way for those of us who follow him. He tells his friends that when he gets to the big city of Jerusalem, he will undergo great suffering at the hands of the leaders of his day. He will be killed, lifted up on a cross, die, and be raised by his Father. And they want none of it. Especially Peter who protests, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

Suffering- Peter is not the only one who wants to deny it. Suffering is something most of us want to avoid. Peter's stumbling block is one we share.

Little children are great at asking Why? questions like "Why can't I stay up late?"

I remember when our children were 3 and 4 years- the "why?" came at the end of every statement. "Go, pick up your toys. Why? Eat your dinner. Why? We are going to the park. Why?"

I recall when my mother died. Hallie was 4 years old. And like 4 year olds do...there were lots of why questions. Grandma Joycie died. Why? Those are hard ones. We suffer with our children when they hurt. Imagine how God feels when God's children suffer.

Why questions. We adults have them, too. Why do hurricanes do so much damage? Why is there is so much suffering and pain... cancer... violence... rage... opioid addiction... unemployment... human trafficking...

Why?

We are a lot like Peter, aren't we? "Why does Jesus have to die?" asks Peter.

Of course, he wants to avoid death and violence. Jesus is his friend and mentor, his savior and teacher. He does not want to see him die...even if there is promise of being raised to new life.

Peter wants to save Jesus, but Jesus doesn't need saving.

Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan" ...which is precisely where we need to be to follow him. Not out front where Peter wants to be, calling the shots. You can only follow Jesus from behind. And following Jesus can lead us to some difficult places like through flood waters, or into a Hospice room, or to speak out against injustice. Jesus never said it would be easy. Instead, he asks us to carry a cross- a cross of all things.

In a world that says, "It's all about me. It's getting ahead, accumulating the most, and having it all." Jesus says, "Deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me."

It is in giving of ourselves- our substance, our time, our hearts, our money....that we find new life. It is the great paradox of faith. And Jesus is just not into self-preservation, is he?

Jesus is asking for commitment, not just involvement.

You may have heard the story....

A Pig and a Chicken are walking down the road.

The Chicken says: "Hey Pig, I was thinking we should open a restaurant!"

Pig replies: "Hm, maybe, what would we call it?"

The Chicken responds: "How about 'ham-n-eggs'?"

The Pig thinks for a moment and says: "No thanks. I'd be committed, but you'd only be involved

Daily we commit and die to self in order to live for Christ Jesus. I find that some folks in the church want someone else to motivate them, to cajole them, to push them to follow...but the call is clear. You have to pick up that cross and follow. No one else can do that for you.

Denying ourselves doesn't come natural to many of us... nor is it easy. David Lose puts it this way,

...that's the hard part. Because giving someone another chance instead of writing them off, forgiving someone who has wronged us instead of seeking retribution, being open-handed and generous with the resources we've been blessed with instead of holding onto whatever we can, offering our future to God rather than planning each step, seeking joy in service rather than acquisition – because we've accepted that what the world has offered is all there is, these different things often feel at first like death, even like dying on the cross, before God uses them to raise us to new life.

It's an act of imagination. But as we take even these small steps forward, God is at work, giving us a taste of life we'd never thought possible and multiplying the impact of our actions far beyond what we'd dreamed.

Until suddenly, just as it felt like we'd lost our lives, we find them.ⁱ

In other words, cross carrying and following Jesus is a blessing. As professor Tom Long says so well, "A life that is spent soothing the pain of the sick, caring for children in need, hammering nails in houses for those without shelter, sharing bread with the hungry, visiting those in prison, and denying oneself may seem like a squandered life in the economy of a self-centered age, but in the storehouse of heaven, it is a lavish treasure." And where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

It doesn't make sense until you live it, until you do it. Because have you noticed that the most joyful, alive people you know, are those who live wholeheartedly in this way?

Why does Jesus suffer and die?

Sacrifice. Forgiveness. Self-Denial.

Love.

Why? Because it is the way...the way to new life.

ⁱ David Lose, "Can you imagine?" In the Meantime, Pentecost 13, August 28, 2017, www.davidlose.net