

TEXT: Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21
THEME: Setting your mind on divine things
SUBJECT: Faith
TITLE: Doing What Is Right

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Messiah Moravian
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Suffering. What mother does not know a basic instinct, a driving need to spare her child from suffering? Two weeks ago we heard the story of a Canaanite mother who breached social and religious boundaries, who persevered when told to mind her place, to beg for help for her daughter living in daily torment.

What spouse does not work to ease a partner's suffering? Mary Daniel took a job as a dishwasher at a memory care facility in order to be with her husband Steve, after 114 days of separation caused by the pandemic.

It is only human to be affected by the suffering of others; it is only human to want to do something to assuage the pain. When Simone Weil was six years old in 1916 she decided to go without sugar because "the poor soldiers at the front" did not have any. That same year she adopted a "godson" at the front, a French custom during WW I, whereby families signed up to send food and clothing to underprivileged soldiers.

By gathering and selling bundles of wood, Simone earned her own money to buy provisions for "her soldier." He came in 1917 to spend a leave with the Weils. Simone grew immensely fond of him. He died in action the following year, and she grieved greatly over the loss.

It is human to be moved by suffering; it is divine to act to alleviate suffering. The gospel reading for today ends with the promise, "For the Son of Man will come with his angels in the glory of the Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done" (Matt 16:27).

At the end of his gospel, Matthew spells out what this means: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him . . . he will say to those on his right hand, "Come . . .for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Actions to relieve suffering are the only basis for the final judgment, according to Matthew. So why is Peter condemned for wanting to spare Jesus from suffering? Jesus tells the disciples he has to go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering. Peter, being a good friend, being only human, takes Jesus aside and declares, "God forbid it! This must never happen to you."

Jesus responds, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me (an occasion for sin); for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." It is a human thing to avoid suffering. It is a divine thing to alleviate suffering. So, what is wrong with Peter's mindset?

Peter still has to learn that those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will save it. Sounds like a Zen koan. Some things are worth suffering for. Taking up one's cross and following Jesus acknowledges that survival is not the ultimate value. She who lives the longest doesn't win. He who suffers the least doesn't win. You can gain the whole world and lose your life. The one who wins, according to Jesus, is the one who loses life in pursuit of some thing worth dying for.

Our text drives home the point that disciples of Jesus are not passive observers of what he does. They are not to be seated spectators watching from the grandstand as Jesus walks into Jerusalem and mortal conflict with the principalities and powers. Rather must they themselves enter the arena after Jesus. For Matthew, Jesus is not a substitute but a leader. Contrary to popular piety, Jesus does not do something for those who do nothing.

Instead, Jesus commands, 'Follow me.' This authoritative call leaves no room for considerations of convenience or even self-preservation. Discipleship is a *doing of what is right*, no matter how irksome the privations, no matter how great the dangers. Faith means obedience, and obedience is the grave of the will. 'Not as I will, but as you will.' (Davies and Allison, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary*, p 278)

Simone Weil, along with her parents, escaped Vichy France in 1942, thanks to an American relative who paid the astronomical sums demanded by shipping companies to transport Jewish refugees. From the moment she landed in New York, knowing her parents were safe, Simone plotted her return to France. Like Bonhoeffer, who could not rest in the security of New York but returned to Germany against the wishes of his friends, Simone, against the wishes of her family, boarded a ship sailing for London.

Weil attained a position in the French government in exile led by Charles de Gaulle. She was a brilliant social and political philosopher who was deeply committed to the way of Jesus. In London she contracted tuberculosis and was hospitalized. She refused to eat more than the French soldiers fighting in the resistance and died at age 34.

Her writings still inform and provoke many who look for ways to be more than "seated spectators watching from the grandstands." How do we lose our lives in order to find them? We align ourselves with God, whose essential being is self-giving, by giving ourselves to something other than ourselves in order to learn and be made alive in new ways.

Taking up one's cross and following Jesus may necessitate heroic acts from some, but for most of us it will mean bending our wills to the will of God in less dramatic but no less painful ways. In the epistle reading for today, Paul issues a list of imperatives, commands that follow from following Jesus. The only faithful response is obedience, an obedience that entails suffering.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Be ardent in service, patient in suffering. Contribute to the needs of others. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those

who weep. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Do not be haughty, associate with the lowly.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. In so far as possible, live peacefully with all. Never avenge yourself. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Could there be a rougher cross to carry than not being overcome by evil but overcoming evil with good? The desire for revenge, the will to win, the drive to survive, buried in the grave of “Not as I will, but as you will.” As Bonhoeffer put it, *only the believers obey, and only the obedient believe.*

Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on obedient deeds of discipleship is in his view a restoration of the meaning of faith in a world that had become increasingly bereft of compassion, peace, forgiveness of enemies, purity of heart, and meekness, yet incredibly willing to exploit the poor and oppress those who struggle for justice. Sound familiar?

Faith is not hard because we are called to believe the incredible. Faith is not hard because we are called to believe abstract theologies or neatly packaged doctrinal systems. Faith is extraordinarily challenging because we are commanded, after the example of Jesus, to overcome evil with good.

PRAYER:

That you have made us in the image of your mystery
thanks be to you, O God.

That in the soul of every human being
there are depths beyond naming
and heights greater than knowing
thanks be to you.

Grant us the grace of inner sight this day
that we may see you as the Self within all selves.

Grant us the grace of love this day
that amidst the pain and disfigurement of life
we may find the treasure that is unlocked by love.

that amidst the pain and disfigurement of our own lives
we may know the richness that lies buried in the human soul.