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2nd Sunday of Lent - February 25, 2024

When I was in college,
I was a leader in our habitat for humanity chapter.
and by my junior year it was essentially my unpaid half time job.
I spent a lot of time in the decrepit basement office
in the commons building
Where decades' of other students
had pasted posters and stickers and inspirational quotes on the walls.
One taped near the desktop computer I read all the time,
Simply because it was right there, in front of my face.
I eventually memorized it without realizing it because I saw it so often:
It was attributed to Sister Helen Prejean, the famous Roman Catholic sister
Whose work and writing against the death penalty was made into the movie Dead Man Walking:
It was:

“To hold on, let go. Nothing is solid. Everything moves.
Except love-hold onto love. Do what love requires.”

I think about this quote every time we read this gospel passage,
And the similar scenes in Matthew, Luke, and John.
When I'm confronted by the hard questions
About what the willingness to walk into suffering and death
Has to do with being fully alive.

When Jesus' first disciples are trying to understand,
trying to accept,
trying to embrace
What their newly named Messiah,
is telling them and eventually will show them:
What holding on to love means.
That the cross is necessary for the resurrection.
That we, as individuals and as a community of believers,
Are called to lose our life, so that we might find it.
That this the ability to take up our crosses -
To participate in Jesus' cross -
Is not something that we “should” do,
Or even something that just the very best disciples
or just the saints or the martyrs or
Whoever we idealize *do*,

But that it is the essential path of discipleship itself.
in the words of our presiding bishop,
The way of love itself.

Immediately before this scene
Peter declares boldly that Jesus is the messiah.
Then Jesus says, okay, great,
so let me tell you exactly what this means,
For me and for you.
“Plainly,” in the gospel writer’s language -
Not in parables, not in mysterious cloaked words-
but clearly.
And then Peter rejects this to Jesus’ face,
let’s be honest,
probably speaking for many of the other disciples, too.
Jesus doubles down -
addressing not just his current disciples but the whole curious crowd:
“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.”

One scholar I read this week explains that
The basic meaning of the Greek verb “Deny oneself”
is “to act in a selfless way and to give up one’s place as the center of things.”
The decentering of the self.
It’s one thing to say human beings’ lives should be this way...
But it’s quite another to claim that this is what the Son of God -
What God will and does do.
For us.
This contradicts what these first Jewish disciples
have come to think and to know
about their powerful, creating, loving holy one.
It *still* contradicts what many of us who consider ourselves
Followers of Jesus
have come to think and know about God.
And yet, all of our gospels contain this story,
Or a very similar passage.
All of them have the cross as the pivotal turn
that makes the resurrection possible.

And that’s why I think our question shouldn’t be,
is this way, the way of discipleship,
something that I should choose?
But rather, is this something that is true?
Have I seen this be real in the world:
losing your life leads to saving it,

saving your life leads to losing it?

I think about how so many of the people
who made a genuine difference in people's lives
Or fundamentally altered the path
of a community or a nation
In terms of love and justice
had this basic hinge,
This basic pattern in the arc of their lives.
The decentering of the self,
The willingness to see,
cleareyed,
the challenge, suffering, rejection,
or even death ahead of them,
and to know that it was their work to do
and that God would be found at the other end of the road.

I think about Harriet Tubman,
who fought to gain her own freedom from enslavement,
And then turned around and spent the rest of her life
Freeing 70 other people,
risking her freedom and her life again and again -
[And eventually, fighting for the voting rights of women,
and for the elderly and disabled.]
I think about Oscar Romero,
The El Salvadoran bishop
whose critique of a violent political system
And its effects on the poor
Led to his assassination.
I think about Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch watchmaker
Who sheltered over 800 Jews in her family's home during the Holocaust.
In 1944 her family was found out,
and Corrie and her parents were sent to concentration camps.
She was the only one to survive.
And in our American context,
It's hard to think about the way of the cross and discipleship
Without thinking of Martin Luther King Jr.,
Whose clarity about his call
Caused him to pay the ultimate price of his life.

The lives I've lifted up here
Might have found themselves
in circumstances shaped by power, evil, chance -
Things outside of their control, to be sure.
But they all had a moment, even many moments

Of saying yes to walking the path of discipleship.
Of saying yes to joining the way of the cross
and joining their lives to Christ's.

For some of us, the call
to deny ourselves and take up our cross
Rings hollow -
Because it has been used against us as a tool of violence.
It's important to name that
This core message of the gospel has been used to tell people
That the suffering they've experienced at the hands of the powerful
Is good and right and should continue.
Maybe this resonates for those of us who've experienced racism or abuse,
Members of the lgbtq community,
Women.
People who have heard or internalized
That somehow or another,
Injustices that they've experienced are simply "their cross to bear,"
Not a sign that God's love and God's justice
Are in desperate need in this world of ours.
taking up one's cross
Does not begin in coercion or oppression or force.
It begins in freedom, love, and call.

What might this look like in the everyday lives that surround us?
I think about the person towards the end of a long life,
Making the decision to leave their resources
to an unglamorous but deeply needed ministry in their community.
I think about the recent graduate
whose degree could earn them a lot of money in a morally ambiguous industry,
Whose faith instead compels them to work on
Community infrastructure.
I think about the person whose parent or partner gets a terminal diagnosis,
Who could make the decision to withdraw or leave altogether,
And instead stays to make the journey with them.

When we let go in order to hold onto love,
When we we decenter ourselves in the story,
We practice living the way that Jesus lived.
We practice joining our lives to Jesus.
When we die to ourselves,
We somehow share more in the life of God.
We practice holding onto love
And letting go of everything else.

How are you being called to lose your life, so that you might find it?

I know one thing with certainty:

I do not know what your answer is.

No one else does.

No one but God,

And maybe even you,

In the still small voice of the spirit moving inside.