

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19)
September 12, 2021
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 116:1-8
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: the church is open at www.trinitybend.org.

I'm not sure if I've shared it in a sermon before, but today seems a good day to recall the opening scene of a 2003 romantic comedy. During the opening credits, we watch a video montage of people greeting loved ones at an airport. And then we hear the voice of Hugh Grant, one of the stars of the film, narrating the opening monologue:

Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinion's starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there – fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands ... wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends.

When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge – they were all messages of love. If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually *is* all around. ⁱ

Hence the name of the film: *Love Actually*.

Shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Alan Jackson came up with a response of his own: "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)" was the name of a song he recorded. Any of us who were old enough to know what was going on will always remember where we were that day when we first heard about the planes hitting the Twin Towers in New York City.

Alan Jackson's song recalls the range of our human responses: how we felt as we watched things unfold, what we did in the days thereafter. He wrote the song to try to make sense of it all for himself. And in the refrain, he sums it up in these words:

I'm just a singer of simple songs
I'm not a real political man
I watch CNN
But I'm not sure I can tell you
The difference in Iraq and Iran
But I know Jesus and I talk to God
And I remember this from when I was young
Faith, hope and love are some good things [God] gave us
And the greatest is love

And when he sings the refrain near the end, he echoes that final line two more times:

And the greatest is love.

And the greatest is love.

I begin with those two pop culture touchstones this morning because I think there's more of the gospel summed up there than in most of what we've seen over the past 20 years.

We've just marked the end of the longest war in U.S. history, a war begun in response to the terrorist attacks. A recent AP story highlighted some of the costs of this war:

thousands of Americans dead in Afghanistan, tens of thousands of Afghans, hundreds of thousands in the "war on terror" that went beyond those borders;

2 trillion dollars borrowed to pay for the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq, amounting to 6.5 trillion dollars by the time our children and our children's children pay it all back.

I'm not entirely sure what more to say. The President of the United States, the Commander in Chief, likely felt he had few options in 2001. How could he NOT respond to terrorists hiding behind the borders of the old Afghan regime?

So much remains the same. Following the suicide bombing in Kabul, President Joe Biden could not afford to look weak. "We will not forgive. We will not forget," he said. "We will hunt you down!" Politically, I'm guessing he felt he had no choice. (No more than George Bush 20 years before.) He had to project strength. So he promised to vanquish violence with more violence.

And so it was 2,000 years ago. I think that's the discomfiting challenge in this morning's gospel. Jesus and his disciples are in Caesarea Philippi, we're told. That's an important detail. Caesarea Philippi is a very Roman region – named for none other than Caesar, the very face of Empire. And it's there that Jesus asks:

Who do people say that I am?

The answers are all provocative, to be sure. It's all a bit adversarial.

But Jesus raises the stakes, asking next:

But who do you say that I am?

Peter goes one step further. Peter says that Jesus is no mere miracle worker or prophet. Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah. God's Anointed. The Christ.

Now especially in a place like Caesarea Philippi, that's a declaration of war and a thrilling hope. The Messiah, most folks believed, would come with power and with force to overthrow whatever empire was in charge, to deliver God's people from oppression, to set a downtrodden nation free.

But Jesus, we know, never imagined being large and in charge that way. In fact, it looks to me like Jesus isn't comfortable with Peter's answer at all. He tells the disciples to speak no more of it. And when Jesus goes on to teach them, Mark uses a different title. It's translated as the "Son of Man" – which IS an important and evocative term. But its meaning is less fixed. At the very least, it's one step removed from everybody expected from a Messiah.

Maybe I'm overstating the significance of a subtle shift in terminology, but I'd be hard-pressed to overstate the shift in expectations that Jesus lays out. Even if Peter gets the title right, Jesus is telling him he's got the significance of it profoundly wrong. He tells the disciples not to expect him to impose suffering and death on their enemies. He speaks instead of enduring suffering from their enemies and dying at their hands.

And that's more than Peter could comprehend. And so much less than he wanted.

And it's still so much less than we want for others or for ourselves. It's not what citizens demand from our leaders. And my guess is it's not what we want from our God. Even now.

As the Lutheran preacher and commentator David Lose once put it:

We have to admit that Peter's definition of "messiah" is usually the one we prefer as well. Peter, we, and just about everyone we'll ever know want a strong God, a God who heals our illnesses, provides ample prosperity, guarantees our security, urges our military and sports teams onto victory, and generally keeps us happy, healthy, and wise. ⁱⁱ

But Jesus doesn't give us what we want.

That's the challenge – 2,000 years later – of today's gospel.

And that's the promise, as well.

Instead of giving us what we want, Jesus offers us what we need ... what we need to know about God and about what it means for us to be authentically human (and fully alive) in an unsafe world.

That's the point, I think, of what follows. Jesus calls the crowd looking on to come closer. I think this is Mark's way of calling us to come closer. No longer is this just a story about Peter and Jesus or Peter and the other disciples. This is about you and me – and about God. And in this moment, Jesus challenges us to follow his way.

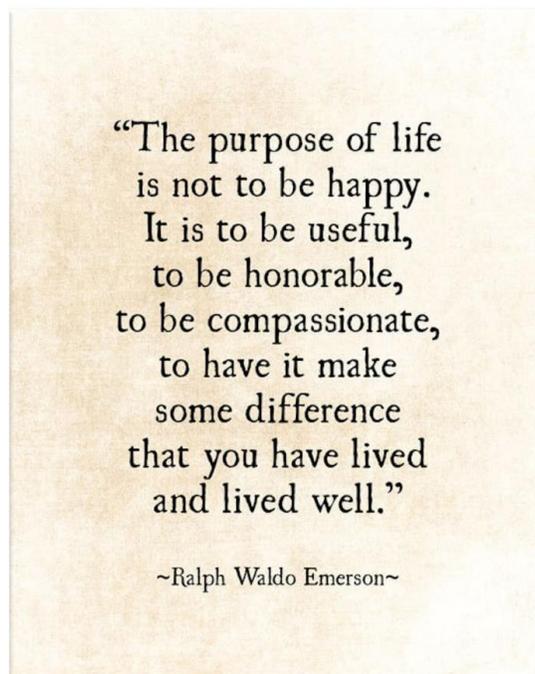
Jesus speaks of those who strive to save their life, only to lose it, and of those who are willing to lose their life for the sake of something bigger – for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of what Jesus is showing us about how to live in this upside-down and dangerous world.

Something's lost in translation. The word we get translated as "life" is, in the Greek, ψυχήν (*psyche*). It doesn't translate easily. It sometimes gets translated instead as "soul," but that feels a bit vague to me. It's who we are – who I am. The me nobody can see but is the most real thing there is to say about who I am.

I learned this past week that *psyche* is also the Greek word for butterfly. It's who the caterpillar always was but is only known as it emerges from the chrysalis and flies free. It's who we're called to be – and to become!

What's at stake is not merely biology; it's identity. It's about purpose. And vocation. And we too-quickly settle for less.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once called into question our willingness to settle too easily, saying:



Which brings us back to September 12, 2001.

In a "pastoral word" from our Presiding Bishop this past week, Michael Curry called on us to remember more than the horrors of what happened 20 years ago yesterday. He called on us to remember "first responders who put their lives at risk, modeling the sacrificial love of Jesus, who said, 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'"

The cost of 20 years of war notwithstanding, he called on us to remember the invaluable lessons of how we came together, "praying, grieving, and also working together" as we recognized our need for God and for each other.

And in his final words, Michael Curry challenged us to apply those precious memories to our present times:

Memories of that tender cooperation—of love for each other as neighbors—serve as guiding lights for the present. Amidst the ongoing pandemic and natural disasters that have taken so many lives and pushed first responders to their limits, and amidst a worldwide reckoning with the sin of racism, we are called to become the Beloved Community whose way of life is the way of Jesus and his way of love.ⁱⁱⁱ

That's the challenge and the promise.

Or as Hugh Grant narrated:

If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually *is* all around.

And as Alan Jackson sang:

... I know Jesus and I talk to God
And I remember this from when I was young
Faith, hope and love are some good things [God] gave us
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ⁱ Watch the opening scene/credits @ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUoxXpqof8A>.

ⁱⁱ David Lose @ <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/09/pentecost-16-b-intriguing-elusive-captivating-and-crucial/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Curry @ <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/pastoral-word-from-presiding-bishop-michael-curry-on-20th-anniversary-of-sept-11/>.