

Grace and Will
Sermon for the 13th Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 17 A
St. Martin's Episcopal Church

Readings:

[Exodus 3:1-15](#)

[Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c](#)

[Romans 12:9-21](#)

[Matthew 16:21-28](#)

I am an unrepentant fan of Harry Potter—the books and the movies. This last Friday, September 1, all true Potter nerds like myself commemorated the very last scene in the books, because it was supposed to take place on September 1, 2017—19 years in the future from the end of the final victory against evil in the series.

I remember very well the day I finished reading that final book. I won't spoil it for those of you who haven't read it, but one thing was crystal clear. The author, J. K. Rowling, had just written a 7 book epic that reinforced the key claims of the gospel—that through love, good always triumphs over evil. That the only way to have a full life is through the willingness to risk loving and being loved. That no one has greater love than to be willing to lay down his or her life for their friends.

A large part of the story of Harry Potter involves trying to understand whether, even though a child, Harry is the person destined to take on the most powerful force for evil in his world—and win. The signs of him being the Chosen One are not clear. He does not get to have the straightforward calling that Moses gets in our first reading. There is no “burning bush” moment that lays out exactly what he is supposed to do. Rather, he spends a lot of his time trying to figure out exactly who he is and where he belongs, and what his real purpose in life is. In other words, Harry Potter is exactly like us. We believe that we are placed here to live lives of meaning and purpose, to overcome challenges and stand up for what is right, but we don't know exactly how or if we have what it takes to do it. We all want to be loved. But are we willing to lay down our lives for each other in the name of love?

In our gospel today, Jesus is explaining that he is going to be called to do exactly that. He tells his friends that he is going to have to die in order to bring about abundant life for all, and die a most horrible and painful death, at that. And we know that his friends do not take this news well. Our evidence is Peter's rebuking. Peter loves Jesus, and never wants to lose him- as we all feel about those we love. And what does he get for his loyalty? He gets told he is acting like Satan! Poor Peter—a week ago he was praised as being the rock on which Jesus will build his church, but today, he ends up being a stumbling-block, compared to Satan himself. And then Jesus adds on that we too, as his followers, are to take up our cross if we want to follow him.

The admonition to deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow Jesus is perhaps a bit less shocking to us than it was in the time of Jesus's earthly ministry. The idea that we have to be willing to suffer for our faith seems especially harsh here, though, given that it was just a few weeks ago that Jesus was assuring us that his yoke was easy and his burdens placed upon our backs were light. How can this be good news?

It may sound to us at first glance like Jesus is telling us to be willing to throw our lives away—after all, the cross was a symbol of criminality and death. Trust me, to Jesus's followers, crucifixion was no empty metaphor.

Yet we also live in a time when the cross has been transformed from a symbol of shame to a symbol of victory, thanks to Jesus's willingness to embrace it. That cross has been transformed into a symbol of God's grace. And that's important for us to think about as we try to make sense of what Jesus is saying. Jesus is not asking us to embrace death, but instead, to truly embrace a life grounded in God, who loves us no matter what. Jesus is asking us to be willing to use our God-given lives for the good of others and for the good of the world.

Deep in our hearts, many of us have a hard time believing that God's love is that limitless for us. Every love we experience in our lives changes us in some way. Choosing to embrace God's love for us will change us, too. Now, change can be a scary thing. It's scary, because any real change in our lives involves embracing a death of our former selves- letting go of all that is familiar to us, that made us who we have been, in the hope that we will become something better.

Before I was ordained, I was a teacher for 27 years. One of the things I used to tell my students when I was a teacher is that every choice you make to do one thing means that you will close the doors to other things you might have done instead—what we in the social studies business call “opportunity cost.” Some people hear that phrase and they focus on the word “cost,” and try, usually to their detriment, to find a work-around that usually just results in a mess. But the foundation of real choice is opportunity—opportunity for something better. But we can become better versions of ourselves only if we are willing to first let go of our old selves. When our hands are clenched into fists around all that we’ve ever known, we can’t take hold of the good things that come our way.

It’s like when we went to the circus when we were kids. I was always fascinated by the trapeze artists. Sure, there was a net stretched below them. But even with that, I was always amazed by their willingness to let go of the first trapeze, and for several heart-stopping moments to be clinging to nothing at all as they tumbled through the air. There was always a moment when their hands were empty: the trapeze artist cannot move from one swing to the next without releasing the perch they have occupied in order to open their hands for the trapeze swinging toward them.

Our own lives are often just as risky at times too. We move from one swinging perch to another throughout our lives, as we develop and grow. In between the letting go and the grasping, there are those heart-stopping moments when we are holding on to nothing. But without opening our hands, we have no way to grasp the new life-change coming toward us. This is also true of our lives as followers of Jesus. Unless we empty our heads, hands, and our hearts in a similar manner, letting go and emptying ourselves of all that has tied us to the way we have been and the way we were, we cannot take hold of the abundant new life to which we are called through the loving voice of Christ.

It’s important to remember that we are given the gift of each day from God, and what Jesus is reminding us here is to use each one of those days as much as possible making the most of that life. That doesn’t mean living selfishly or over-cautiously. It means that the only life worth living is one in which we are willing to be transformed by the power of God’s grace to live for others.

Jesus stretched his arms wide upon that cross as God Incarnate to remind us that God's arms are themselves stretched wide to encompass the entire world—no exceptions. Jesus stretched his arms wide upon that cross as a fully human person to remind us that we are all capable of loving each other that much, that abundantly. God loves us into being and breathes love into us from the moment of our births, and we are called to try to breathe that love and grace into a world that, through our own human folly and selfishness, is gasping for it.

We pray for grace, but we fear it at the same time. Some of us fear the full implications of grace, because if we can't EARN our way into heavenly salvation, that means we have to let go of our belief in our own agency and power (to which Paul and Jesus and even Moses would all say, "PRECISELY!"). We have to let go of the illusion that we get to make the rules, and lean into the idea that God's dream for us, God's call to live into our full potential as his beloveds, calls us to embrace grace for everyone. God calls us to reject exploiting others, to reject the earthly rules of scarcity that then drive fear and division among us and our fellow-creatures. God's free gift of grace calls us to be transformed to embrace abundance and trust, charity and hope.

If we really take seriously the idea of God's love and grace for ourselves, we will then open up to the necessity of transformation and we WILL ourselves become vessels that overflow that grace into the world. Now THERE'S the good news!

We fallible human beings can't be touched by a love like that and emerge from it unchanged. That's why our reading from Paul talks about how our lives as followers of Jesus are changed and transformed through our faith in Jesus over faith in human structures and empires. And if you look really carefully at that list of tasks Paul places before us as the fruit of living by grace in communion with all of creation, those tasks that are the marks of grace seem to get progressively harder. He starts out with general admonitions that most of us can agree to. Loving each other? Sure. Taking care of those who don't have enough? Absolutely, even though maybe some might argue that some of "them" don't deserve help. Sound familiar? Yet that right there is where we start forgetting that we ourselves are where we are only through the blessings of amazing grace given to us. And Paul's not done! The next things he tells us are even harder! Bless those who

persecute us? Turn away from vengeance? Be kind and loving to those who hate us? Talk about denying ourselves! Talk about a cross to bear!

Yet that is exactly the full meaning of grace. The taking up of the cross by Jesus is an act of love and complete empathy for the world and for each individual person and thing in it. It is a defiant act of solidarity with all who are oppressed in body, mind, or spirit. It is standing alongside people whom the rest of the world would ignore or condemn because that is the true meaning of grace—given without reserve on God’s part and without merit on our part. Given only through the love that Jesus calls us to embody without any sort of personal agenda.

That kind of love leaves its marks on us, as the Harry Potter books insist again and again. That kind of love settles into our very marrow and transforms us, makes us strong and fearless. That kind of love seeps into us as we gather together around the altar to give Jesus praise and thanks as we are fed by him. We bear those marks as a result of already being loved beyond belief by God. These marks are not a bid to earn love, but a response to that abundant love already given to us. It’s there every time we trust that the Lord has promised good to us—we just have to be willing to empty our hands and our hearts to take those good things, and let them empower our lives as disciples. Let’s take up our cross—for we know it leads to resurrection and life abundant.

Amen.