

## **One Wild and Precious Life--Sermon, 2 Lent B February 25, 20218, St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Ellisville**

Y'all, I have something to share with you.

I hate winter.

I am one of those people who walks around in January and February asking myself why, exactly, I live someplace where the AIR hurts my FACE, and where even the act of walking can become an act of bravery.

And then there's the Winter Olympics, which combines sport with misery in ways that boggle the mind. I mean, one of the main sports in the Olympics involves couples throwing each other around and twirling each other over their heads while there are knife blades on their feet, and trusting that no one will hurt the other! And if ever there was a metaphor for marriage or any long term relationship, there you have it.

I watch the Olympics, and I wonder who in the world invented curling-- except as maybe a drunken joke that the Canadians are pulling on the rest of the world. Only Canadians could combine shuffleboard with housework and put it on ice. We're actually watching people trying to influence the course of a rock with a handle on it slide on an ice rink. Maybe it reminds me too much of watching people drive during the ice storm on my ordination night the December before last, but I don't get it.

I'm a summer kind of person. Summer is glorious, but winter. Lasts. Forever. Summer is lush and abundant, while in winter, everything shrinks. And gets chafed and raw.

That's why I love this poem by Mary Oliver<sup>1</sup>, called "The Summer Day:"

*Who made the world?*

*Who made the swan, and the black bear?*

*Who made the grasshopper?*

*This grasshopper, I mean –*

*the one who has flung herself out of the grass,*

*the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,*

*who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down –*

*who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.*

*Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.*

*Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.*

*I don't know exactly what a prayer is.*

*I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down*

*into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,*

*how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,*

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Oliver (1935-), from *House of Light*, 1990

*which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

It's that last line that gets me, every time.  
*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

It goads me into a sense of appreciation of the blessing of every day, even in—maybe especially in—this winter time, when there is not a grasshopper to be found, and when I am ashamed to admit that probably the last time I was idle was during my last retreat back in late June before I was ordained a priest.

I thought of the challenge of that last line of that poem when I was reading this morning's gospel, because I think that Mary Oliver's challenge embedded in that question is exactly the same challenge Jesus is posing to the crowd in our reading from Mark today.

I think it's important to remember that the meaning of the word "gospel" is "good news." I repeat: "gospel" means "GOOD news." And I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but I bet a bunch of us initially hear this challenging gospel, and draw back, a bit scared, even, just like the disciples and especially Peter were, at Jesus's talk of suffering, and death, and giving up your life, and crucifixion. Those words start to make our heads buzz. Especially with what's going on in the world today. Kids massacred in schools. Wars. Famines. And even beyond that, the everyday careless way we sometimes treat each other that just begins to gnaw around the frayed edges of our hearts until we wonder if there is any safe place for us.

And it's no different in Mark's gospel. Jesus no sooner gets recognized as the Messiah by Peter than he adds a great big qualifier to that announcement—almost like he won't allow himself to be proclaimed Messiah until his disciples know exactly what that means.

After Jesus rebukes Peter, he starts delivering some of the castor-oil side of the good news: he is going to suffer, as the gospel he brings is not only rejected by the powerful, but seen by some as a threat to their existing power structures. And we have to remember that Mark's audience was being persecuted even unto death, just like Jesus was. This prediction Jesus offers is reality for Mark.

As Jesus does over and over again, when he challenges us to take up our cross and follow him, he is talking about the upside down world of the gospel. If you want to save your life, you must lose it, Jesus says—and the tendency is that all we hear is the word "lose," just like Peter. More importantly, if we want to follow Jesus, we are called to "deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus." Even less appealing! Who would want to sign up for that?

But listen carefully to what Jesus said: he would suffer and be killed, but then rise again. We see here, even at the start of Lent, the precious Easter message of resurrection, at the same time that Jesus then calls US to new life. THIS is the good news!

The time in which Jesus lived was a time in which the vast majority of people in the Roman Empire lived in abject, crushing poverty. Scarcity and want were real and pressing concerns. And the thing about living in a scarcity mindset is that it heightens one's sense of disconnection and competition against one's neighbor.

But how can we understand this gospel reading in our own context? I think we need to start by understanding that these readings are rooted in not just faith but hope, and hope is rooted in the future. Looking forward in expectation, and then calling us to act to make our hope reality.

The cross in Jesus's time was something shameful, yet for us now it is a sign of faith and hope we wear the cross around our necks as jewelry, even! It is such a symbol of hope that we now regularly make the sign of the cross over ourselves as we are blessed or absolved. Think of that! The cross itself is now awakens us to faith and hope, for it leads to the conquering of sin and death within us when we embrace it.

After Jesus rebukes Peter, he turns to the crowd and reminds us that being Christian means not been conformed to the ways of the world. We see this same concern reflected in our passage from the letter to the Romans. However, we have to be careful here do not take these verses out of context. Throughout Christian history, some Christians have read these verses as meaning that it is our lot in life to suffer, and that our own personal suffering is all apart of God's plan and has been pre-ordained just so we get our reward in heaven. Notions like these deny the underlying principle of free will, and risks making God seemed like a puppet master who doesn't care about our suffering and pain, and frames creation as something broken. And that's as wrong as it could be.

Instead, from our side of history, we know that the cross led also to the resurrection. For us, we are reminded here that the way of discipleship will not always be easy or without cost. But it is up to us to see that the cost is worth it in giving us new life in Jesus—not just some time in the future, but right now here on earth, as well.

Looked at from this angle, I think that might have some applications for us in our current situation. What if we understood that denying ourselves and taking up our cross is meant to remind us that we are called as Christians into community? We are called to love each other, be compassionate toward each other, and take care of each other in faithfulness, in good times and bad. What if taking up our cross today and denying ourselves were understood as swallowing the harsh word rather than unleashing it on someone in the heat of the moment? What if denying yourself and taking up your cross was understood as giving up something you have a right to, if that would spare someone else pain or suffering? What if denying ourselves and taking up our cross means that instead of using people and loving things, as so much of society tells us to do, we loved people and used things to help us accomplish that?

What if denying yourself actually means being true to what makes us children of God, made in God's image—that we are called together to live in community, loving our neighbors as ourselves and not trying to draw lines about who are neighbors are, and who are neighbor's aren't.

I think the good news here is that Jesus is calling us to love. Real love. And anyone who has ever known real love—for a parent, or a child, or a friend, or a spouse, or a beloved, adoring pet-- knows that it calls for a denial at times of yourself for the sake of the beloved. Our pilgrimage as Christians—as true followers of Jesus-- is to work toward the vulnerability of loving everyone that fully, because we see the face of our beloved Savior Jesus Christ in everyone, even in those who are different than us.

Christ is calling us to turn from the wintry chill of suspicion and leverage, to opening our hearts to summer abundance. What if we understood what Jesus is saying here as “Take up your love and hope, and follow me in loving each other as much as we love ourselves?”

English poet and priest John Donne most famously expressed this truth in his Meditation XVII<sup>2</sup>, which we have allowed to become a cliché. Upon hearing the church bells toll a funeral, Donne’s first thoughts were not about himself, but about his relationship with others, all of whom are beloved of God. Yet let us look at his famous statement again, in light of Christ’s reminder to us to love each other, and completely:

*No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

That open-hearted love is at the heart of Jesus’s death on the cross. Jesus did not raise his hand against the fear and evil that led to Golgotha, although he certainly could have, as Satan reminded him during Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness. Jesus’s embodiment of God’s love for us has no limits, and God’s Son becoming human—the “Son of Humans,” as he refers to himself—reminds that we, too, are made by God to take seriously the obligations love puts on us as well as the gifts love brings us. This is where the good news is for us in this gospel.

The season of Lent reminds us forcefully that we are made for God and for each other, not just for ourselves, or even just for a narrow circle of people just like us. We are called to embrace others-- in all their flaws and weaknesses—because, especially as we are reminded in Lent, as well as in times of trial and loss, that we acknowledge our own flaws and weaknesses, and yet receive grace and mercy anyway.

We embrace our cross when we use our treasures to build up our communities, and the miracle of resurrection is, in doing so, we actually end up blessing ourselves. It is when we embrace abundance rather than cling to notions of scarcity that we find true peace and security. That’s Christ’s call and challenge to us. That’s Christ’s blessing to us. New life. Resurrection. Trust. Hope. Faith in each other enough to give each other—our neighbors, our communities large and small--what we ourselves all need, without worrying that somehow that diminishes us.

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<sup>2</sup> John Donne (1572- 1631) English priest and poet, excerpt from Meditation XVII, in *Devotions on Divergent Occasions*, 1624.

How can we, especially as the people of St. Martin's Episcopal Church, take up our cross of love today? How can we align our lives with the life of Jesus, which is the only life worth having?

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

We embrace and take up our cross today, because it also means we embrace resurrection, the new life of Christ, which is the pearl beyond price. Taking up our cross calls us to understand that we are not fully human without embracing each other right here and now, and without checking ourselves any time we are tempted to seize the opportunity to use others rather than see ourselves as intimately connected with each other, even with those half a world away. We profess that all are beloved in the eyes of God as children of God. We are called, as followers and not just fans of Jesus, to take that simple sentence seriously. We don't have to be perfect at it, and we will fail sometimes, but right now, with all the fear and anxiety in our lives, might be the time to embrace the abundance of grace with ourselves and each other.

To "deny ourselves," simply means that in loving, and giving of ourselves without fear, we have everything to gain.

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

Amen.