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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X31
13 Pentecost (Proper 17A) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 3 September 2017

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Psalm 26:1-8
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

The Stoic, the Witch and the Wardrobe

"Your words... became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts" (Jer. 15).

You might remember Calvin and Hobbes the comic strip about a little boy and the stuffed tiger who in his imagination comes to life. In one Calvin's teacher says, "If there are no questions, I'll move on to the next chapter." Calvin raises his hand and the teacher calls on him. He says, "What's the point of human existence?" The flustered teacher snaps back, "I meant about the subject at hand." Calvin replies, "Oh – frankly, I'd like to have the issue resolved before I expend any more energy on this subject."¹

Before going about your business you too may want to have this issue resolved. Although it might not initially look like it on the surface I believe that our gospel today addresses this very point. The meaning of human existence is at stake when Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mt. 16). Questions about meaning have been at the heart of our conversations with each other since the beginning of humanity.

Ancient Greek philosophers (like the Stoics, Epicureans and Skeptics) formed rival schools to guide their students, to help them learn how to live. They shared in common a goal described by the Greek word eudaimonia. It means flourishing, happiness and joy. They believed that we accomplish this through ataraxia, which is a kind of detachment, a freedom from anxiety. You could define it as imperturbability, or having an even keel. They hoped to find a middle way between life's highs and lows so that the world would not exercise too much power over them.²

These ancient teachers believed that two things prevent us from enjoying life. First, we cannot control our emotions. Second, we fail to pay enough attention to the present. We suffer because we live in the past through our regrets and nostalgia. Or we miss the present because of our worries about the future.

Unfortunately we cannot resolve this problem merely by knowing about it or through a form of intellectual knowledge. Instead we have to change our habits of thinking. Ancient Greek philosophers dedicated themselves to thought experiments; these served almost a kind of self-hypnosis to change their view of the world.

One of these is to imagine that this is the last day of your life. How would you feel? What regrets would you have, in what ways would you feel satisfied? To keep himself in this frame of mind a wealthy ancient Greek named Pacuvius paid for a funeral ceremony for himself every day. The slave next to the Roman general in the victory parade would say, "Memento mori. Caesar remember your death."

There are many other examples. Imagine losing all of your possessions. Imagine that life is really just a theatrical performance. Imagine that everything that happens in every moment of your life, every thought that crosses your mind and every stranger you pass on the street will be repeated exactly for all time. Through exercises like this ancients hoped to cultivate *amor fati*, a love of fate. With Spock-like equanimity they hoped to look at their life and say, that if they had to do it over again, they would change nothing.

Jesus offers something very different. At first it might seem scary. I know people who really did take up the cross and follow Jesus. They worry me. At my old church we had a young couple with two babies under the age of five. They gave up everything to become Christian legal missionaries. They moved to Rwanda where they risked their lives on a justice commission rebuilding society after the genocide.

When something fell through in our rotating shelter, my friend Alice, a pragmatic and clear-minded widow in her eighties, welcomed homeless people into her own house. We have people like Alice here and frankly they scare me sometimes. You want to say something to them like, "Don't you know that you could be killed?"

This same dynamic lies at the heart of today's gospel. Jesus tells his friends that it is necessary (*dei*) for him to go to Jerusalem, undergo much suffering (*polla pathen*), be killed and on the third day raised. Peter often speaks for the disciples and, for that matter, us. He goes to Jesus and says *hileos soi kurie* literally "Mercy to you Lord!"

I cannot perfectly translate this and no one else probably could either. He wants to find a way out for Jesus, some other plan to get this done. But despite the nobility of his concern and his love, he wants Jesus to deviate from the mission. In doing this he offers a genuine temptation to Jesus. To me it feels like Jesus wants to believe him but then comes to his senses. This is the source of his vehemence, as he exclaims, "Get behind me, Satan!"

The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says that Satan "from the beginning of time has offered humankind alternatives to the will of God." You have surely felt similar

temptations to do and be something other than God intends you to do or be.³ Peter asks Jesus to be the Lord, but without suffering. Since this is impossible his recommendation amounts to asking Jesus to abandon his mission.

Perhaps Jesus sees that the disciples need help with this so he explains further saying, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"

When Jesus talks about going to Jerusalem, his humiliation at the hands of the people's leaders, his great suffering and death we shut down. We fail to hear the last part about being raised up again. Like the Greek philosophers Jesus is talking about a way to live.

Taylor goes on to say that in this teaching Jesus refers to what she calls "a deep secret" which is that fear of death always turns into fear of life, into a stingy and cautious way of living that is not really living at all... [T]he way to have abundant life is not to save it but to spend it, to give it away, because life cannot be shut up and saved any more than a bird can be put in a shoebox and stored on a closet shelf."⁴

We all know ways to save our lives. We know how to be so very careful never to say the wrong thing. We can avoid risks by not ever sharing ourselves, by leaving people far outside of the parts of our lives that matter to us. We can save our lives by never seeking or offering forgiveness. You probably have your own way of saving your life. And if you are sitting here you are likely to also have realized that this life we spend so much energy saving is not one of great joy.

In the face of the temptation to save ourselves Jesus instead insists that we live a life that matters. This means pouring out our life in whatever unique way that God calls us to do it.⁵ Through prayer, service, listening, worship and encountering the Holy at this table we can meet the One who directs us toward joy. What Jesus offers is not so much a frame of mind as a relationship with a person, God. Before going further I want to try to describe what this encounter feels like both in a technical way and a more evocative one.

In 1917 the German philosopher Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) published a book called *The Idea of the Holy*. He believes that human beings encounter something beyond ourselves. He calls this "the numinous." He writes that it is a, "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling... whose object is outside the self." He also describes it as ganz Andere, as wholly other. It has different elements. There is the mysterium tremendum

which evokes a sense of fear (for instance as when we hear about taking up our cross), and the *mysterium fascinans*, which he calls the mystery that fascinates and attracts.

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) was deeply influenced by Rudolf Otto. His series of children's books describe many encounters between the children and the Christ-like lion Aslan.⁶ In his book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the children learn about Aslan while visiting in a talking beaver's lodge. Beaver tells them that, "Aslan is on the move." Let me read a passage directly from the book.

"And now a very curious thing happened. None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different. Perhaps it has happened to you in a dream that someone says something which you don't understand but in the dream it feels as if it had some enormous meaning – either a terrifying one which turns the dream into a nightmare or else a lovely meaning too lovely to put into words, which makes the dream so beautiful that you remember it all your life and are always wishing you could get into that dream again. It was like that now. At the name of Aslan each of the children felt something jump inside."⁷ We all meet God in our own way. For some of you it may be a little like this.

When it comes to the meaning of life each of us has to decide. On the one hand we have the thought experiments of the ancient Greek philosophers. According to them life is most often a hardship to be endured. Life is an energy to be conserved. For them we live by fearing death and using this fear to protect our emotional life. They choose *ataraxia* to never be fully invested or attached, so that they can with honor rise above their emotions. In doing this they become a kind of slave to the idea of enjoying their life.

On the other hand we can choose to be with Jesus, to follow his way. He recognizes that the world will try to manipulate us through our fear and that sometimes we will be called to choose a path of suffering. Sometimes we may have to go out beyond the limits of where we feel safe.

However Jesus does not invite us into death but into real life, free life, joyful life. For him, life is a gift and there is always more of what is being given. God never runs out of life. The more we share, the more we receive.

If there are no more questions I'll move on to the next chapter.

¹ Daniel Heischmann, "Seeing Our Students," National Association of Episcopal Schools Weekly Meditation, 28 August 2017.

² Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (NY: Other Press, 2010) 109-117.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Risking Life," *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 78.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵ On an almost daily basis since coming here to Grace Cathedral I have felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude. I feel so thankful that God created in me such strong desires to do this ministry (chapter meetings, sermon preparation/delivery, pastoral care) along with this perfect way for me to realize them.

⁶ Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis – A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013) 288-9.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, illustrated by Pauline Barnes (NY: Scholastic, 1950) 67-8.