

Sermon
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 3rd, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [EXODUS 3:1-15](#); [PSALM 105:1-6, 23-26, 45C](#); [ROMANS 12:9-21](#);
[MATTHEW 16:21-28](#)

“A Life of Being, Having and Doing Enough”. This is the title of a book by Wayne Muller. What is enough? This is the question, isn't it? Are we enough? Do we have enough? Are we doing enough?

We've had an abrupt “shifting of gears” in our Gospel passages last week and this week. We have two scenes at Caesarea Philippi and in those scenes Jesus shifts from active —teaching, healing— to being acted upon, as he faces Jerusalem and takes up his cross.

Peter certainly experiences some “whiplash” in this shifting of gears: seeming to get it so right in his response to Jesus's question “Who do you say that I am?” with “You are the Messiah” that he is called “blessed”, and then getting it so wrong this week that Jesus rebukes him with a harsh “Get behind me, Satan”.

Jesus goes on with words like “deny” (yourself), “take” (up your cross), “lose” and “find” (your life).

When I read these texts, I often find myself leaping to the “doing”. How to deny myself? To take up my cross? To lose and find my life?

It's easy to “come adrift” here and to feel that these actions, these requirements, are impossible. And they are if we make it about ourselves as individuals. If we make the denying and the taking and the losing and the finding something that we as individuals are doing in isolation, it is impossible. But Jesus doesn't say take up your cross and “go it alone”. He says take up your cross and *follow me*.

This is what keeps us from coming adrift and feeling overwhelmed. We are not “going it alone” in this life. We are never alone, because Jesus went ahead of us, through the suffering, through death, and he is with us always in his Resurrection.

Peter didn't actually get it right with his response "You are the Messiah", because what "Messiah" meant to him wasn't what it meant to Jesus. Peter thought "Messiah" meant a confrontation, a power struggle, and victory for Jesus and for them by association. In today's Gospel passage, Jesus begins to teach what Messiah really means. For Jesus, Messiah meant suffering, and it meant trusting that God would work through that suffering for the sake of all of creation: for everyone, and everything. And God did work through that suffering, God showed us that death does not have the last word: love does.

When Jesus says "follow me" this reminds us that through the Resurrection, *we are enough*, however and whoever we are. We are loved beyond measure. Following Jesus means recognizing that there is suffering in this world, and that God, that the Risen Christ, is with us in it, always. We are not alone: God is with us.

Jesus ahead of us, God with us, transforms denying of self into something very different from self-denigration, or from a call to a life of starkness and austerity. Denying of self when we follow Jesus —when we remember God with us— is about identifying with a larger reality than our own self-interest.

I mentioned this identifying with a larger reality last week. Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke about Ubuntu, which means: "I am because of who you are". He said this:

"We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity." (Archbishop Desmond Tutu)

This is at the heart of the Gospel, and at the heart of being Christian!

It's at the heart of the passage we heard from Romans. Paul reminds us that as followers of Jesus we are called to put love first. We are invited to be self-aware and intentional, looking for goodness everywhere, and bringing forth holiness from all its hidden places. We are called to remember that we are all connected — that we are because of who others are. We are to live humbly and in harmony, choosing kindness and unity. This is the kind of being and doing that we are called to as followers of Jesus.

In the book I mentioned at the beginning “A Life of Being, Having and Doing Enough”, Wayne Muller writes this:

“Every single choice we make, no matter how small, is the ground where who we are meets what is in the world. And the fruits of that essential relationship —the intimate, fertile conversation between our own heart’s wisdom and the way the world has emerged before us— becomes a lifelong practice of deep and sacred listening for the next right thing we are required to do. We make the only choice that feels authentic and honest, necessary and true in that moment.”

Deep and sacred listening for the next right thing we are required to do means remembering God with us and making space and time to listen. That is the “doing” we are called to first on our life’s journey.

We also heard about Moses and his “burning bush” experience this morning. This reminds us that God is always calling – and sometimes we notice. We are always on holy ground, the world is full of “thin places” and every so often we stop, take off our sandals, and soak in Divine revelation. If we are intentional about noticing these God moments we will see beauty, wonder, and love right where we are. This also is the “doing” that we are called to in this life: taking time to pause, notice and then respond to the holiness everywhere.

I was reminded of a poem this week, called “Fire”, by Judy Brown:

What makes a fire burn
is space between the logs,
a breathing space.
Too much of a good thing,
too many logs
packed in too tight
can douse the flames
almost as surely
as a pail of water would.
So building fires
requires attention
to the spaces in between,
as much as to the wood.
When we are able to build

open spaces
in the same way
we have learned
to pile on the logs,
then we can come to see how
it is fuel, and absence of the fuel
together, that make fire possible
We only need to lay a log
lightly from time to time.
A fire
grows
simply because the space is there,
with openings
in which the flame
that knows just how it wants to burn
can find its way.

(Judy Brown)

The flame that knows just how it wants to burn is God with us. We *are* called to build fires on this life's journey, making open spaces to listen first, and remembering the concept of Ubuntu in our decisions and actions. We are called to make fires that spark attention to injustices, that burn for peace and reconciliation, and that affirm everyone and everything. Last week's Pride Parade was another log on the fire of solidarity and love with our 2SLGBTQIA+ siblings.

And, so, I invite you to remember Jesus ahead of you, God with you, always. Remember that you are enough. You are loved beyond measure. Think about denying yourself through the lens of Ubuntu. Remember to pause on the holy ground that is everywhere, all around us. Think about fires that you might build in the days ahead, making sure to leave "...openings in which the flame that knows just how it wants to burn can find its way." In Jesus name. Amen.