

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020  
St. John's from Home  
Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45C; Romans 12:9-21;  
Matthew 16:21-28

*for those who want to save their life will lose it,  
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it*

*love one another with mutual affection*

In the 3rd century, the ancient world experienced the Plague of Cyprian. At its height, five thousand people were dying per day in Rome. When the plague reached Alexandria, Egypt—one of the great Christian cities of its time—as many ran away from the suffering city, Christians were seen by their non-Christian counterparts running towards it. Christians weren't experiencing the same fear as others, being firm in their confidence: death, they knew, would not be their end.

And so those Alexandrian Christians were seen taking care of the sick, and even dying with the sick as a result of their care, dying “serenely happy” according to one witness, “cheerfully accepting the pains” of the ones they cared for. It was an act of mercy intended to relieve, as best they could, the suffering of the dying.

Those Alexandrian Christians wouldn't be the last to show such strength in their desire to lessen the suffering of others, even at great cost to themselves. Charles Borromeo was a Cardinal in 16th century Milan. Again, as Milan was overcome by a different plague, and as others fled the city, Borromeo remained, feeding the hungry and caring for the sick, personally bathing their sores.

Borromeo, despite the fact that he most certainly faced the risk of death, did not get the plague. He incurred another cost, though, as he worked to relieve the suffering of others—when the money ran out, he went into great personal debt in his efforts to feed and care for his charges.

Henry Morse, a century later, would repeatedly sneak back into plague-ridden England—he had been banished—risking his life because he insisted on serving those with the plague too. He contracted the plague three times, and recovered from it three times. In order to serve the plague-ridden, for Morse, also meant risking his life to sneak across borders he

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was not meant to cross. He was eventually captured and killed for his attempts at reducing the suffering of others.

It is these sorts of Christians, who did such extraordinary things, even risking their lives so they might reduce the suffering of others, these are the Christians that come to mind as I read this text from Matthew: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." To offer so much in the service of others, and in following Jesus, right up to risking their lives—it is extraordinary.

It's this kind of text like that would give us the confidence to say "I am secure in Christ, and I do not fear death because I know that death is not the end. I am willing to even lose my life, that I might find it, as I work to reduce the suffering of the afflicted."

I'm beginning to hear something similar to this at this time, sometimes in Christian circles, and sometimes in more secular conversations. "We are Christians, and as Christians we are sure and confident that this life is not the whole of life, so shouldn't we be willing to gather for worship? Or to serve the sick? To put ourselves at risk, for the sake of a greater good? After all, as Christians we are most sure that death is not the worst outcome."

The secular conversation is a bit different, but related. I'm hearing it around the back-to-school debate. "Isn't life always risky? Aren't we always risking our life, in many of our daily activities? Aren't there risks we should take for the sake of a greater good?"

I'll admit that I have some sympathy with this line of thinking. We *are* secure in Christ. As Christians we do *not* live in fear of death. Rather we live in the confidence that even *death* cannot come between us and the life God has in store for us. And as someone who grew up in an era where risk was not nearly so managed as it is today, I can say I had great benefit from all the adventures I was able to have, precisely because my parents weren't so protective. And I can show you the scars to prove it.

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Aren't these words of Jesus right and true? That the more we wish to save our lives, the more we lose our lives? And aren't all these decisions we are making to minimize risk just a participation in a misguided attempt to manage and thwart a death none of us can manage or thwart anyway? Shouldn't church, in-person, be exactly what we are doing? Shouldn't we want, as Christians, to show to the world the real life-giving power of Jesus, a power of life so strong that we have no fear of death?

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury and now master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, just this month wrote about this sort of thinking. "The annoying thing about [this way of thinking] is that it is almost right," he says. "There are worse things than dying, and facing death without panic is indeed something that ought to characterise people who profess serious faith." He goes on to say that "there are features of our world," like death, "that we are not in charge of and never shall be."

But Williams does not, in the end, support what he calls Christian heroism, an "individual fearlessness or freedom [that means] a blithe disregard for the well-being of others." Because "the key factor is not the simple risk of death to me as an individual." The key factor is that our own willingness to risk our own death in this pandemic would mean *increasing the suffering of others*.

And this is what I found most helpful in what Williams has to say about pandemic in our time. What he points out is that the sort of Christian heroism that leads to a willingness to flaunt our fear of death, or to willingly risk our well-being, leads not only to the likelihood of infecting others—but that it *increases the suffering of others*.

"Risking the health of others ... also increases the risk of [a] wider range of traumas and losses." The trauma and loss of continuing "the bewildering disruptions of our life in society." The trauma and loss that comes with "the strain on those working in public utilities and healthcare." The trauma and loss of "[mourning the death of a loved one] in abnormal circumstances." The trauma and loss of dying alone.

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To flaunt public safety protocols does not communicate to others a healthy Christian confidence in the face of death, or a healthy willingness to take risk. It communicates a willingness not to decrease, but to *increase* the suffering of others.

And this is where we could look back again to those Christians willing to face their own deaths so they could care for, and reduce the suffering of the plague-ridden in 3rd century Alexandria. Or we could look back to Cardinal Borromeo in 16th century Milan, going into great personal debt and risking his life to reduce the suffering of others by feeding the hungry and bathing the sores of the sick. We could look back to Henry Morse, too, a century later, risking his life sneaking back into plague-ridden England, getting the plague three times in his efforts to reduce the suffering of others. In all their efforts to reduce the suffering of others, they were indeed asked to risk, and sometimes lose, their very lives.

And so how lucky are we, that in our efforts to reduce the suffering of others that comes with “the bewildering disruptions of our life in society,” how lucky are we, that in our efforts to reduce the suffering of others that comes with “the strain on those working in public utilities and healthcare,” how lucky are we, that in our efforts to reduce the suffering of others that comes with “[mourning the death of a loved one] in abnormal circumstances,” how lucky are we, that in our efforts to reduce the suffering of others that comes with dying alone, how lucky are we, that our efforts to reduce the suffering of others does not come with the risk of our own lives as it did for those Alexandrians, Charles Borromeo, or Henry Morse.

How lucky are we, that our efforts to reduce the suffering of others comes simply with staying home, and putting up with online worship for just a little bit longer.

Because this is what has been given to us as the shape of our spiritual life for this time—to give up something of ourselves, in however small a way. To lose a little bit of our lives, that we might find our lives. Because this is our spiritual sacrifice, this is our offering for the sake of the life and health and safety of others.

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And it's why Marilyn Malton and I have been working very hard to carefully make sure that we keep all the expectations of the diocese, the whole 29 page list of expectations, this is why as a parish we are working hard to put into place all the public health protocols that are expected of us. Because anything less would make us the sort of Christians who would willingly risk the suffering of others by extending our pandemic, rather than working to lessen that suffering of others through due diligence with public health protocols.

And you do have a place alongside all those Christians in Alexandria and Milan and England, those who were willing to give of themselves in order to lessen the pain and suffering of others. Your part is not just to be patient and to put up with online worship for a few weeks yet, but to see this patience as your sacrifice, your spiritual discipline for this time, and part of your willingness to love your neighbour.

The Revd Dr Preston DS Parsons