

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19, Year B)
 September 12, 2021
 Trinity Capitol Square
 Stephen H. Applegate

+In the Name of God: who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

Jesus said, “. . . those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” Mark 8:35-36

On April 6, 1943, a father sat down at his desk to write a letter to his daughter. It was three days before her twenty-first birthday. She was away at college, and it never occurred to this man to call her. A first-class stamp cost three cents, very few people made long distance calls and then, only did so in dire emergencies. The expense was prohibitive.

Cell phones were non-existent. The comic book character, Dick Tracy, would have his two-way wrist radio starting in January of 1946, but communicating in such a way would only be a pipe dream for decades. Marty Cooper, the Motorola engineer, wouldn't invent the mobile phone until 1973. Besides, if you had something serious to say to someone, you wrote them a letter. So that's what this father did.

“Dear Tyker,” he began the letter, using the nickname he had called his daughter ever since she was a baby, “Because I have to go to Rochester tomorrow and may not be back early enough to write you a birthday letter in time for you to receive it on your birthday, I feel I must at least show my good intentions by beginning it tonight.” I do not know whether the father completed the letter that night and sent it off the next day, but I can only conclude that US Post Office offered prompter delivery of first-class mail then than it does now. This particular letter had to travel 130 miles to its recipient over roads that could still be snow-covered in April in that part of the world. The only way the postal service would be willing to deliver a letter that quickly over that many miles these days would be if one bought express mail service starting at \$26.35.

What kind of a letter did this father write to his daughter on the occasion of her twenty-first birthday? What would one of us have written to our child – assuming we had one – upon reaching his or her majority? (– because in 1943 one reached the age of majority at 21 years old, not at the age of 18 as it is now in Ohio and under Federal law.)

The man introduced the major theme in a single sentence – expressed in the formal prose that I suspect he thought the occasion warranted: “I hope you will bear with me while I indite some philosophical thoughts which the years have inculcated in me and which may possibly prove helpful to you in attaining the main objective for which we all live, namely, Happiness.” I should point out that the word happiness was capitalized.

Not a bad theme for a serious letter to a new adult person. Here's how to attain happiness in one's life.

There are many other things that I suppose could claim to be the main objective for which people live: good health, freedom, meaning and purpose, material comfort. I'm sure you could come up with other things to add to the list. But this father chose the attainment of Happiness, with a capital H, as the subject of his letter. How do we find happiness? When Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, he thought that the pursuit of happiness was among certain unalienable rights with which we are endowed by the Creator – right along with life and liberty. He said governments were created to protect these things. But he didn't say how to attain happiness – that wasn't what he was writing about.

For the father writing to his daughter, it was. And in the rest of his letter, he laid out what he had discovered that had given him happiness. And then, he told her what this discovery had taught him about how to live his life. Now, at this point let me identify who the father and daughter were. They were my mother and her father – my grandfather.

I was only 8 years old when my grandfather died, so my memories of him are hazy. Much of what I think I remember about him are probably not my own memories but what I remember of the stories told to me about him. I know he was the oldest of eight children, for example, and that his own father died when he was young. That my grandfather never went to college – that he went to work as soon as he could to help his brothers and sisters go to college, normal school, or nursing school – that he was a traveling salesman selling stationery until he was able to buy the local insurance agency with his friend Floyd Dodge – that my grandmother baked him pies sweetened with saccharine because he was a diabetic.

He was a Mason because he liked to play cards in the Olive Branch lodge above a storefront in the village where he lived, and that he went every week to the local Baptist Church with my grandmother because she had attended a Welsh Baptist church up in the country on Jerusalem Hill. But he never talked about what he believed, nor did he wear his religion on his sleeve – if I can borrow that old phrase from an earlier time to describe him.

But when he wrote to my mother back in 1943 on the occasion of her 21st birthday, he bore witness to what had helped him attain happiness. And what had helped him was his belief in Christ.

He acknowledged that because there had been discussions and differences of opinion about Jesus, a great many people had become confused “even to the point of becoming doubters. And” he said, “when I was younger I, too, was one of these. Because of the unhappiness which resulted, my confused mind cast about for something which would give me comfort, stability, and hope.” My grandfather found it in John 3:16 – arguably the best-known verse in all of scripture: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

“We all have to believe in something, or we could not go on living,” my grandfather wrote to my mother. “As we grow older, our faith is shattered in so many people and many things, we lose confidence, in others as well as ourselves. But there is one rock we can cling to.” For him it was in Jesus – the one God gave because he loved the world so much. The letter is the only evidence I have of my grandfather’s faith. After his death in 1961, my mother collected some of his papers and had them published in a little book I treasure.

The Gospel passage this morning is about another group of people who were looking for happiness and contains the story of how one of them, Peter first recognized who Jesus was – that he was the Messiah. The story appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but I especially like the story in Mark’s version. It is an amazing story as he tells it, and it comes at the hinge point of his Gospel – right at the very start of a new section. Everything that has happened up to this point – the whole series of deeds and incidents in the life of Jesus – has raised this question: Who is this that he can do such things? In Mark’s version of the story, Jesus has raised the question so inescapably that ordinary people – people who made no pretense of being disciples – had found themselves not only asking the question but had been forced to answer that Jesus must be some very great person indeed – John the Baptist, for example, or one of the great prophets of Israel who had risen from the dead.

Such was the answer the disciples gave when Jesus asked them, “Who do people say that I am?” But, of course, as great as John the Baptist may have been, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, identifying Jesus as one of them did not go far enough. The disciples – who had seen things other

people had not seen – who had witnessed the full truth about Jesus – who did they think Jesus was? “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus said.

In his book, *A Season with the Savior*, Edward Sims talks about an Italian film, “The Gospel According to St. Matthew” that came out in 1964. “It was a literal and matter-of-fact rendition of that Gospel narrative,” Sims writes, “acted largely by Italian peasants. . . . Peter’s confession was depicted in particular realism and it captured, in a way I had never grasped, the preposterous character of this whole scene. Remember this is an itinerant teacher and healer, followed by a band of unprepossessing apprentices; the country folk receive him as a worthy rabbi, the establishment views him as a dangerous fool. To hear him called ‘the Messiah’ would have alarmed both points of view, and to hear him respond as if this were an important secret would have confirmed his lunacy.”

Because that’s just what Jesus did. He said, keep quiet about this. Don’t tell anyone. Trust me when I say that people have puzzled for centuries over the question of why Jesus ordered his followers not to tell anyone about him. Certainly one good reason for them to keep quiet is the expectations that were circulating widely about what the Messiah would do when he finally came. There were variations about this, to be sure, but those who did expect a Messiah were clear that he had to do three things – rebuild or cleanse the Temple, defeat the enemies of Israel, and bring God’s justice – all of which involved the exercise of raw power.

These may well have been Peter’s expectations, since he couldn’t abide it when Jesus began to teach his followers about the kind of Messiah he was going to be – someone who would undergo great suffering, be rejected by the Jewish leadership, and be killed. And I have no doubt that Peter and the others understood the implications for themselves of following a Messiah like this. Jesus, in fact, was inviting them – and anyone who wanted to be a disciple – to come and lose right alongside him. And when I talk about those who want to be Jesus’ disciples, I am talking about us – about you and me.

What Jesus says is that those “who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [his] sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Yes, Jesus will usher in a new era, but it is one where we are asked to leave self behind . . . take up our cross . . . let ourselves be lost for Jesus’ sake.

In his letter to my mother, my grandfather talked about his philosophy of life – a philosophy derived from his faith in Christ. He told her that there are two directions our lives can take. He said that we naturally wish to acquire happiness, “and we know we cannot acquire it by being selfish. . . . The Love Life (as my grandfather named it) is a constantly expanding life. No one is ever . . . happier than when he or she has done some service, no matter how slight, for someone else. . . . Love, or service to others, is an ever-growing plant.”

Following Jesus the Messiah means nothing less than losing our lives for his sake and for the sake of others – and then finding them in him. One writer summed this up brilliantly when he wrote: “Following Jesus is . . . Mark’s definition of what being a Christian means; and Jesus is not leading us on a pleasant afternoon hike, but on a walk into danger and risk. Or did we suppose,” he said, “that the kingdom of God would mean merely a few minor adjustments in our ordinary lives?”¹

Amen.

¹ Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, page 112.