Living Without Fear

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost, August 28, 2005

Jeremiah 15:15-21 Psalm 26 Romans 12:1-8 Matthew 16:21-27

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

Imagine a room in Corinth, a booming Greek city about 50 miles from Athens. The year is 57 – not 1957, just 57. While an oil lamp casts yellow light on stone walls, two men are talking in Aramaic and Greek.

There's no historical proof for it, but imagine with me that the apostle Peter is visiting from Rome. He is talking with Paul – his headstrong, impassioned friend, a Roman citizen, a Greek-speaking Jew, and the Apostle to the Gentiles. They are talking about death, about Christ, about the Gentile and Jewish Christians in Rome. About how difficult church is.

It has been a hard time for the church in Rome; though they have survived persecutions and divisions, they are worried about changes, and perhaps they are afraid that they can not survive much longer.

It is late now; Paul, who has many friends in Rome -- Priscilla and her husband Aquila, and many others -- Paul has begun a letter to the believers in Rome, the letter we have been hearing from for months, a letter that Phoebe would carry with her to Rome.

And now, before Paul picks up his reed and ink again, the two men tell each other stories of persecution and change. Peter tells Paul the story of how he was afraid of death, and of how Jesus rebuked him: the story we heard in Matthew's gospel today. And Paul tells Peter about how he, Paul, persecuted the church, acting as witness to the stoning of Stephen, Peter's young friend.

Peter had been afraid of death. Paul had been afraid of the changes that Jesus' message had wrought. Death and Change. Death and Change. The twin fears that the churches in Rome were facing, as their leadership and their numbers fluctuated under a series of Roman expulsions and persecutions.

The lesson that Jesus taught Peter, and that Paul taught Rome, is that we can worry so much about losing what we have, worry so much about change, worry so much about death, that our fear becomes the object of our worship.

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

The world that Paul warns the Romans not to conform to is the world that theologian William Stringfellow would describe 19 centuries later, a world which worships the power of death. Death is worshiped when some thing or ideal or state or creature or person places their own survival over service to God and service to others. In that moment, death becomes the object of greatest fear –and therefore the object of worship.

In Nero's Rome, as in the world today, great powers and principalities spent enormous sums of money, and wasted the lives they deemed expendable, to defend titles, ideologies, states, and wars. Worshiping death by offering to war and death their wealth and the lives of their young men. Ignoring the homeless poor whose cries were drowned out by the trumpets of war and the circus of wealth.

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The church in Rome would survive, and flourish – although it would undergo bloody persecution from Emperor Nero, who blamed the small Christian community for the fire which destroyed much of Rome. The church in Rome would flourish because through

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baptism they had the freedom to die, and therefore the freedom of resurrection. The churches in Rome flourished by not making death and change the object of their fear and so the object of their worship. They did not worship Rome, or power, or fear, or death. They did not even worship religion; they did not seek their own survival. **God** was all that they worshiped.

The churches in Rome flourished because they fearlessly offered to God their truest selves, their deepest gifts. And in doing so, their minds were transformed and renewed, their worship was spiritual and reasonable, their sight was on what was good and acceptable and perfect. In living without fear, they could live together as members of one body, inter-dependent connected.

It is the same reason we are here this day. Not to serve Messiah, but to serve *the* Messiah. To be transformed, free from all fear, filled with the love of God; each of us inter-connected as integral parts of the Body of Christ.

We are here to be set free from the world's fear of death, here to be healed from the noise of wars and televisions, seeking strength and comfort from our pain and the pain of those we love.

We are here so that we may return to the world, to our families and friends to the strangers we meet, in order to reach out in compassion and generosity, in order to live the ministries God has given to us.

Therefore, I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your truest selves as a living offering, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

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