Proper 17  Losing and Finding  Matt. 16:21-28
A sermon preached by the Reverend Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH on Sept. 3, 2017.

Lord Jesus, Supreme Master of losing yourself for others, help us to lose and find ourselves in your love. Amen.

One of the recurring themes in Jesus’ ministry was suffering. We heard it again in the Gospel that was just read, “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” In my Biblical Concordance variations of the word “suffer” spread across two columns of verses printed in ridiculously small print. There’s lots of suffering in the Bible. But suffering is not confined to the Bible.

Suffering is everywhere. We have witnessed it firsthand this week in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. It shows itself in places where terrorism randomly kills innocent people. Among those who lack health insurance. In the lives of children in our city for whom gun violence is an ordinary occurrence. In those affected by deadly addiction to opioids. The sick and isolated and despairing ones in our world and perhaps under our own roof. As I contemplate the suffering of just those of whom I am aware I often feel overwhelmed. Like Peter I want to distance myself from suffering. Tell Jesus he must back off. Especially when one has a choice about whether to accept suffering or not. But perhaps, Jesus is telling us, we choose this path at our own peril.

When Jesus told the disciples that he must undergo suffering, I think he chose that word with great care. Today we often use the words pain and suffering interchangeably. One of my favorite teachers, Richard Groves, the co-founder of the Center for the Sacred Art of Living, wrote, “Pain is the hard truth of disease, old age, and dying; however, our response to pain—called suffering—is highly subjective.” Rarely do people choose pain unless it is a necessity in order to address a deeper problem or cure an even more acute pain. Suffering, however, is often a choice. Parents willingly choose to suffer for the good of their children. Soldiers endure hardship and risk their lives for their country. In fact, choosing suffering for another is the true meaning of compassion, the path to finding life in abundance.

Could it be that this is why Jesus is so adamant that he suffer and that we follow him—that he is not testing our commitment-- but wants to show us that there is more to life than personal security and comfort?

There is a phrase that we use in various circumstances in which one faces a difficult decision. We say, “I choose not to die on that hill.” Sometimes we say it facetiously, but there are times when it is a matter of great seriousness and our choice of the hill on which we will make a stand becomes a test of one’s integrity and faithfulness.

The context of this Gospel lesson is one of growing conflict for Jesus. Herod had executed John the Baptist for speaking truth to power. The religious establishment sought to discredit Jesus by criticizing his disciples for not following the religious purity code. And as if that were not enough, the poor, the hungry, and the unending numbers of those who came to him seeking healing certainly must
have made Jesus painfully aware of the brokenness visited upon so many and divisions between haves and have-nots.

It is in the context of this growing tension that Jesus asked his disciples who people said he was. In the first part of this story which we read last Sunday, we heard that Peter made the great confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the promised one sent by God to save his people. And it is in this context of human pain and growing conflict that Jesus tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem. It is there that he chooses to suffer, die and be raised again. This clearly is not what Peter expected of God’s chosen one and Peter wasted no time in lodging his protest. The idea of the long-awaited Messiah suffering and being killed was not part of any faithful Jew’s game plan. The hope and expectation was for liberation from Roman rule and restoration of Israel’s fortunes, not torture and execution. But God’s love and will is more inclusive and restorative than even our most reckless and generous hopes.

I don’t know about you, but the language of “take up your cross and follow me” has become so piously formulaic that it leaves me numb. Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase gives us a fresh look at Jesus’ message in this text. Peterson put it this way: “Then Jesus went to work on his disciples. ‘Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?’”

“Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self.”

Embrace suffering? Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said as much when he wrote that we reach moral maturity on the day that we realize that we really only have one choice in life: “Genuflect before something higher or begin to self-destruct.”

Choosing to enter into the pain of this world by following the way of Jesus will bring you and me in touch with sadness, powerlessness, and vulnerability. But strangely enough, as we follow this path, that to the world seems to be one of downward mobility, we become more aware of God’s presence and power to pull us through. We also become more open to the pain of others and might even begin to see that those whom we think of as enemies are more like us than different; that they, too, are people for whom Christ died and rose and to whom Christ means for us to be reconciled. By embracing suffering we will find a purpose worthy of our lives that is the only way to overcome the divisions of hatred and fear that seem so intractable.

Over fifty years ago a prophet stood in our sanctuary and proclaimed this truth. Dr. King said, “So we can stand before our most violent oppressor, even those who bombed the home of my brother...and who tried to bomb the room where I was staying at the motel—we can say we will beat your physical force with soul force. We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will go on in our struggle to be free, and in the process you may not like it but we will still love you. ...be you assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer.”

Then he continued, “One day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves. We will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process. And our victory will be a double victory.”
Jesus intentionally chose the path of suffering to show us God’s will to lead us into a way of living and loving that will lead to a double victory—discovering the fulfillment of living for the purpose for which we were created and in the process joining God in creating a new world by overcoming evil with good and making enemies into friends. Jesus bids you and me to follow, assuring us that he will be with us every step of the way; steadying us if we waver, lifting us up when we fall, equipping us with courage to love; and giving us peace and joy that the world cannot give.

Furthermore, Jesus knows full well our weakness and calls us into community so that we might support and encourage one another in our walk of faith. This community is where we learn of a different way of living in this world, a way of living based on God’s will, not our own. It is where we practice loving and serving, leaving our comfort zones to address the needs of the world around us. It is where we practice forgiveness because loving and serving one another, much less the world, does not come naturally to us. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus calls us into a continually deepening relationship with him and one another, empowering us to risk more even in the face of our fears. So come today and be nourished at Christ’s table. Open yourself to God’s will for your life and our life together; that we may find meaning and hope by choosing his way of suffering love. Following Jesus, come and find the way to freedom, wholeness and peace.