

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)  
Matthew 16.21-28  
August 28, 2005  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

“Sabbath time” doesn’t only happen on Sundays. Last Wednesday I clocked some “Sabbath time” in the city, joining my mom and niece for a performance of *The Light in the Piazza* at Lincoln Center.

One of the main characters in this Tony-winning play is a young woman named Clara. She is beautiful but “simple” because of an accident that arrested her mental development years before. The **audience** knows this, but Clara’s would-be fiancé and his family **don’t**. The scene in which the father-in-law-to-be seems to have **finally** caught onto this sad fact is heart-wrenching. He’s beside himself and angrily asks Clara’s mother, “Why didn’t you tell us this sooner??” Nearly in tears, she answers, “I **tried to, I tried to**, so many times....” And she **had** tried. But they hadn’t really wanted to hear her.

When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, tried at the high priest’s house, handed over to Pilate and crucified on Calvary, his disciples may have wanted to ask something similar to Clara’s father: “Why didn’t You tell us this sooner? Why didn’t You warn us things might turn out this way?” But instead of saying, “I **tried to, I tried to**, so many times....” Jesus would have replied, “I **did**, three times.” But when He made the three Passion predictions on the road to Jerusalem, prior to Holy Week, the disciples **sure** hadn’t wanted to hear what **He** had to say either.

Peter, who **last** week made one of the greatest confessions of faith in all of Scripture, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16.16) **this** week says

one of the dumbest things in the whole Bible. In response to Jesus' prediction of His suffering and death, Peter protests: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" (Matt.16.22)

And Jesus says:

"Get behind me, Satan! For you are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Matt. 16.23)

Peter, the solid **rock** on which He would build his church, has become a **stumbling stone**, an impediment to ministry, a barrier to God's plan.

I always thought those strong words, "Get behind me, Satan!" meant "Get out of my sight because you're a distraction, go away because you don't get it." But "Get behind me" is literally "**Go** behind me," which can mean, "Fall back in line; let **me** be the leader, **you** be the disciple." "Go behind me" can **also** mean, "**Follow** me, **learn** from me, **dog** my footsteps all the way to my death and resurrection, and that's how you'll end up where you belong, where you're meant to be."

If Peter wasn't happy to hear that Jesus' earthly end would be crucifixion, he certainly wasn't any happier about Jesus' encouragement of His friends to pick up their own crosses:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matt. 16.24)

We've heard those words so often, maybe it'll be helpful to come at them from a different angle. Listen to the paraphrase found in *The Message*:

"Satan, get lost. You have no idea how God works."

Then Jesus went on 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 be in such a hurry to go into business for yourself. Before you know it the Son of Man will arrive with all the splendor of his Father, accompanied by an army of angels. You'll get everything you have coming to you, a personal gift. This isn't pie in the sky by and by. Some of you standing here are going to see it take place, see the Son of Man in kingdom glory."

Jesus is teaching His friends that when it comes to faith, there are some things that are **more important** than life and others that are **worse** than death. Later He'll give up His life as a ransom for theirs and ours, teaching with actions rather than words.

Self-preservation is a basic human instinct. It's called "looking out for number one." Saving our own skin comes naturally to us. Putting someone else first **doesn't**, except maybe for a mother bear response to protect our children.

This is why I'm fascinated with the minds and hearts of people who rush into burning buildings to save strangers. It's why I love reading books like *Fiet's Vase*, that I've mentioned in the past, and now another book called *The Righteous*, both of which tell the stories of people during World War II who put their own lives on the line to save others whom they often didn't even know by name.

*The Righteous: the Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* by historian Martin Gilbert (NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2003), is specifically about those honored as "the righteous among the nations" by the nation of Israel at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. "The righteous among the nations" are **non-Jews** who risked their lives to **save** Jews from imprisonment and extermination.

Unfortunately but not surprisingly the heroic ones were in the vast minority. One Polish-born Holocaust survivor, Ella Adler, was asked if was helped by any Gentiles during her ordeal. Her reply was:

“Thank you kindly for your recent letter inquiring as to whether I had experienced a kindness from a non-Jew during my four years of incarceration during the Holocaust years. Sorry to say that I personally do not recall any such kindness during that period.”  
(p. xviii)

Baruch Sharoni, one of the members of the Yad Vashem committee that decides who is designated as one of “the righteous”, says that the number of possible candidates is relatively slim, “because so many more who could have contributed to the rescue did not.” But he also says:

“I see the savers as true noble souls of the human race, and when I meet with them I feel somewhat inferior to them. For I know that if I had been in their place I wouldn’t have been capable of such deeds.” (p. xviii)

Truthfully, I am afraid I wouldn’t have been and never will be capable of such harrowing heroics either. And yet Jesus says:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matt. 16.24)

We don’t have permission to flee from suffering, our own or anybody else’s. We have been forewarned that bearing our own and alleviating others’ suffering is at the heart of our Christian identity. We are challenged to live out the faith conviction that some things are more important than life and others are worse than death.

Contemporary Christian artist Steven Curtis Chapman sings a song called *What Now?* about recognizing Christ in those in need. When it happens, are we willing to reroute our lives and shoulder the cross as Christ did?

