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## *Losing Our Life for Love*

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**A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton**

**Proper 19B**

**Mark 8:27-38**

The first time I went on a silent retreat I was in my early twenties. A friend had suggested we travel from Atlanta to the Episcopal convent in Augusta, St. Helena's, for one of their annual Lenten offerings. I remember driving to the weekend without much of a sense of expectation. I was looking forward to the quiet time, but really had no idea how the time would be structured. I had never met a nun, Episcopal or otherwise, and I had certainly never spent time in a convent.

That Friday evening the twenty or so of us who had registered for the weekend gathered in a circle. We talked about the season of Lent, and I assume there was a theme of some sort or another, though I do not remember it. As part of the introduction, we were told that several of the nuns were available to meet with us during the weekend for spiritual direction. I had no idea what that meant, but I thought it might be helpful to talk to one of the nuns during my time.

The next morning I sat down with Sister Elsie, again with very few expectations. There were no burning spiritual issues or questions I was trying to resolve. Sister Elsie must have asked me some questions, but I remember little of our conversation. I do remember the assignment she gave me. She suggested that I pray with a passage from scripture. She gave me the passage of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before his arrest and crucifixion. She encouraged me to use my imagination and to place myself in the scene. She suggested that I actually imagine myself as Jesus.

I was a bit nonplussed. I was not sure what the point could be of imagining myself as Jesus. But, I gamely settled into the chapel later that day and began to see myself in the scene. I imagined what it was like to know I had to go to my death. I imagined the sadness and terror I felt when my closest friends were not able to stay awake with me. I became so engrossed in the scene; I literally could imagine the gravel under my fingers as I lay in despair as I cried out to God. Why was I being asked to do something so hard? Why wouldn't God remove this suffering?

Gradually, in the course of my meditation I had a deep sense of peace as I came to rest in a sense of God's presence. It had been a moment of profound closeness and affinity with Jesus than I had ever sensed. Some might have even called it a moment of conversion.

While I had been a Christian for quite some time, there had always been a piece of me that was detached from Jesus. Especially Jesus' humanity or at least my need for it. I knew that it was important that God had become one of us, but the sheer power of knowing that Jesus had suffered had escaped me. After that time in Augusta, I would never experience my own suffering in the same way. Nor would I see the suffering of others in the same way.

You see, while no great tragedy had befallen me, by my early twenties I at least understood that suffering was a part of life. Not one I accepted easily, or even understood. But I knew it could not be avoided. But in that moment in the garden of Gethsemane, I did see that suffering could be transformed. Because while Jesus had been alone--I was not. Somehow his generous offering of himself, even to isolation and sadness, had changed forever how we would encounter suffering.

"Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Mark 8:31-33)

We have encountered a harsher version of Jesus these past weeks than at least I prefer to remember most mornings. His harsh name calling interaction with the Syro-Phoenician woman last week, is only mildly more disturbing than this harsh turn towards Peter. Peter is the first human in the gospel of Mark to correctly identify Jesus as the Messiah. But, he sure doesn't get partial credit for that answer. When, he doesn't grasp the nature of what it is to be the Messiah, Jesus puts him in his place.

Peter has stepped out of bounds to be clear. To take your teacher aside and attempt to correct their understanding is rarely wise. And the way in which Peter rebukes his master makes you wonder whether he fears Jesus has become possessed of an evil spirit that needs handling. Why else would he claim that being the Christ, the anointed one could possibly involved yielding to the powers of the day and dying? You have to wonder whether at that point, Peter even heard the promise of resurrection.

Jesus' announcement of what his calling was to be, had to be shocking, horrifying, and the furthest thing from Peter's understanding of what a Messiah was. What anyone would have imagined a Messiah to be. It is easy, thousands of years this side of the resurrection to forget how utterly shocking it was to see the power of God manifest in the utter powerlessness of suffering and love.

Or is it?

Is it really easy to accept suffering? Do we experience it in our own lives and blithely move forward? Do we see it in the lives of those we love and imagine that is how life is supposed to be?

Or do we secretly hope that if we live in a certain way, we might avoid it altogether?

But if we are really honest, we know deep down, that to be human is to suffer and all the denial and avoidance in the world, cannot protect us from our limits and the brokenness of the world we inhabit.

Someone asked the great theologian C.S. Lewis why the righteous suffer. His response was reportedly, "Well, why not the righteous? They are the only ones who can take it." I think what Lewis is getting at is that as Christians we have a choice about how we encounter suffering. We are not given a pass, but we are given the opportunity to be transformed by it. The transformation comes from the deep companionship we are offered from a God who chose to explore the fullness of humanity even to the point of fear, betrayal, death, and sadness. If I believe in a fully human savior, I have to believe in the one we have seen in the gospels the past few weeks. It is the savior who allowed himself to be transformed by someone outside his community and had the courage to challenge his follower's misperception about where kingship leads us.

To choose Jesus, is to choose the cross. It is to willingly bear the suffering that comes to each of us, but to not have it be the final word. This may feel like a dire prospect. That somehow if we pick up our cross we will all be walking around struggling under its weight, with tight grimaces on our faces. But I think to follow Jesus, particularly in places of suffering yields a much different face.

Like most of us this week, I was filled with horror at the news of Ambassador Christopher Stevens death in Libya this past week. He died Tuesday in an assault on the American Consulate in Benghazi, the very city where he had arrived aboard a cargo ship in the spring of 2011 to help build ties between the upstart rebellion and the rebels.

I knew little of him before this week, but as his friends have reflected on the power of his life and work, a profound witness emerges. Chris Stevens knew what he was getting into when he accepted the assignment to return to Libya.

He knew, his longtime friend Daniel Seidemann said, that Libya was a place of great promise, but also one of great

peril."When he went to Libya, he had no illusions about where he was going," Seidemann said. "He has probably done more than anybody on the planet to help the Libyan people, and he knew going in that this was not going to protect him."

In his own work he had warned about the dangers of the region as far back as 2008. "He risked his life to stop a tyrant, then gave his life trying to help build a better Libya," U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Wednesday.

"The world needs more Chris Stevens," Clinton said.

In a State Department video prepared to introduce him to the Libyan people after his appointment as ambassador in May. "I worked as an English teacher in a town in the High Atlas Mountains in Morocco for two years, and quickly grew to love this part of the world," he said.

"He joined the Foreign Service, learned languages, won friends for America in distant places and made other people's hopes his own," Clinton said.

Another colleague said, "He wasn't looking for a ... cushy ambassador's spot," he said. "He loved the Libyan people and was passionate about helping." (from an article on CNN.com dated September 13,2012)

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For 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." (Mark 8:34-35)

Most of us will not literally be called to die for those we love. But the claim is no less radical as a result. We die a little for love each day. And in that dying we find new life.

We can only do this if we trust deeply in the presence of Christ. Then we are free look at the world without illusion, and we suffer for love. As Christians we are asked to give up the worldly temptation that suffering is something to be avoided. It is not to be sought out for it's own sake, but if we are fully engaged in loving, we will encounter it. But we do not go alone. We find ourselves deeply accompanied by the Messiah, who transforms our suffering through great love. That is the promise of new life.

Amen