

Sermon for Pentecost 15 (19B)

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Christ Church, Andover

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Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Good morning, Christ Church! This is the first time I've seen many of you since I've been back from my sabbatical. I just want to say how wonderful it is to see all of you here this morning. It's good to be home, after a truly wonderful six months of adventure, and rest, and renewal. I look forward to sharing some of the experiences I've been having with you in the weeks and months to come. And I look forward to hearing what's been going on for all of you, too.

Yesterday's New York Times had a front page story titled [Lehman Had to Die So Global Finance Could Live](#). Do you remember last year this time? It was a year ago this week that all hell broke loose on Wall Street when banks began to fail. The author of the Times article said that it was the panic set off by Lehman Brothers' failure that put massive bailouts in place, which eventually saved the global economy from full-scale collapse. I'm not an economist and cannot pretend to judge whether he's right about that or not. History will surely tell us whether the way things were handled then was ultimately good or bad. But I'm intrigued by the title of his article. The analogy is not perfect, but the writer is at least hinting at what we hear in the Gospel today: the paradox of losing life in order to save it.

Jesus' disciples didn't like hearing him talk about suffering and dying. That didn't fit their expectation! It's not what they wanted to hear! But Jesus called the crowd together and said to them, "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 the sake of the gospel, will save it.

That's really not what *any* of us want to hear, is it? We're way too busy trying to save our lives. Survival is the first priority in the biosphere, and at times it seems like the *highest* goal we can aim for, doesn't it? Most of us find the whole idea so completely counter-intuitive, so un-Darwinian! We're all about doing what we can to save our lives and the lives of our families. At the very least, this is just too abstract, if not completely wrong! And certainly not the best slogan for evangelism we could think of: "Join us at Christ Church – where you must lose your life in order to save it!"

What does Jesus mean, and what can this possibly mean for us today?

Let me tell you a story that I think might help shed some light. It's a story of something that happened in South Africa back in early June. Carolyn and I were attending a conference of emerging church leaders from all over Africa. We were part of a group of Westerners who were there as participant/observers and partners in a conversation about where the church in Africa is going in this post-colonial period – and, in South Africa, the post-apartheid era. The theme of the conference this year was "The African Reformation."

One afternoon there was a panel discussion focused on how apartheid and then its overthrow had affected the lives of South Africans. The panel was made up of people of all different racial backgrounds: three Blacks, one "colored" and two white Afrikaner men. Each of them in turn told their stories. The next to the last person to speak was an older man in his eighties. Every South African knew this man's name. It was a name that made chills run down the spines of people during the apartheid era. Adriaan Vlok. He had been the Minister of Police during the final years of apartheid, the enforcer of the apartheid laws. His actions were notorious: assassinations, bombings, raids on anti-apartheid groups. He told us how he had always thought of himself as a Christian. He was a churchgoer his whole life, and he believed the ideology of the Reformed Church in South Africa that said racial separation was God's will. He believed he was doing God's will in enforcing racial separation. He and others believed they were fighting terrorism and believed that people who wanted integration were communists who were doing their best to subvert God's will.

After the fall of apartheid Adriaan Vlok went before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to confess his crimes. The only requirement was that he tell the truth. He did not have to apologize or say that what he had done was wrong. He only had to tell the truth of what he had done – the killings and attempted killings and all the rest. He was able to avoid going to prison because he told the truth. He still believed what he had done was right.

But several years later in the early 2000s, something changed. It began when his wife of forty-five years committed suicide after a lifetime of mental illness. It was during his time of grieving for his wife, and dealing with the pain of his loss, that he came face to face with the reality of his crimes. He began to see all the suffering and loss that he had caused for others. Something in him changed. He described it as a conversion experience. He began to feel a tremendous burden of guilt, and he asked God to forgive him for all the pain he had caused so many people. During this time, he was deeply moved by the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, and he decided that that was what he needed to do. Only by washing the feet of the people he had considered to be beneath him could he find the forgiveness he so desperately needed. He called Frank Chikane, the former head of the South Africa Council of Churches, a noted black minister whom he had attempted to assassinate, now a cabinet member in the ANC-led government, and asked him if he could come to his office to visit him. Chikane was suspicious, but invited him to come. During that visit, Vlok begged for his forgiveness, and asked if he could kneel at his feet and wash them. Chikane allowed him to do so. This was the beginning of a series of such encounters that he had with black leaders and families of his victims. Eventually the press picked it up and it became public throughout South Africa. His repentance and act of submission to those he had harmed was a symbol of his laying down his old life in order to find new life. He now lives a transformed life, working tirelessly for racial reconciliation in South Africa.

Sitting next to Vlok was a much younger white man. He began his own story of how when he was 19 he was conscripted into Vlok's police force. The two of them had never met. Under Vlok's command he had done horrible things that haunted him to this day. He had done his best to seek forgiveness and work for

racial justice in the meantime. He's now a pastor, but he still lives with PTSD, and wakes up in the night screaming regularly. One of his therapists told him some time ago that he could not blame a system for what he was suffering – couldn't blame "apartheid." He needed something specific – a person. He looked at Mr. Vlok and said, "I chose to blame you." He said, "When I curse, I don't use the name of God or any of the usual words, I use your name – Vlok." He told him how uneasy he was, being on this panel with him, but he had heard his story, and he now accepted the change of heart he had undergone. And then he asked his forgiveness for using his name as a curse.

At that point, almost simultaneously, they each asked the other if they could wash their feet. And before our gathering of about 300 people we witnessed these two men remove their shoes, kneel down, take a bottle of water, and wash each other's feet. After they did so, they then held each other in a prolonged embrace, weeping, as we sat watching, not a dry eye in the place. It was a profound moment of healing and reconciliation.

It's not easy to lay down our lives, to be willing to let go of our most cherished ideas, opinions, prejudices. But that's exactly what it takes for us to be reconciled, to be healed, and to find new life.

Jesus came, pointing us always toward life, but he knew we'd have to let go of some things if we were to really find it. We'd have to let go of *life as we know it* in order to enter into something better. He invited the people then and all of us to take up our cross and follow him. In his own death he exposed the powers of evil that were holding the world in their sway. And in his death and resurrection, a new reality was revealed. He revealed the pattern that runs through all of life – the pattern of dying and rising. When we let the old die, we open ourselves to the possibility of new life.

What is it that needs to die in you? I ask myself the same question. What is it that is holding us back from the fullness of life? Are we nursing old grudges? Holding tenaciously onto an image of ourselves that is no longer working? Have we allowed ourselves to fall into addictions that take away our life? Do we persist

in patterns of behavior that create disharmony and division? Perhaps it's time for something to die. Time to lay down our life, so that we can find life.

As we approach this eucharist today, that is what we do. We lay ourselves on this altar, becoming one with Christ in his sacrifice. That is the gift we offer – “our souls and bodies,” as we say in the Eucharistic Prayer, “to be a living sacrifice to God.” And what God offers us in return is newness of life. Think about what it is that you're offering up here today. And then receive the new life God has for you!