

The Resilience Of Nothing Left To Lose
Sunday, February 28, Lent II
Mark 8.31-38
Rev. Tim Phillips



The passage for this morning comes from Mark 8, beginning in verse 31:

Then Jesus began to teach that the Son of Man / the Human One must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders and the religious leaders, 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, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

I want to stop here just long enough to say that I will leave this part aside for now except to notice that the story we heard last week of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness is also the story being told here. The temptation to not be true to ourselves and to our calling is just as likely to come in those vulnerable places surrounded, as Mark says, by desert and "wild animals" as it is among friends.

But the story moves on in verse 34:

[Then] Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, 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 for the sake of the Good News, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and lose their own soul? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Human One will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Abba with the holy angels."

For those who have ears to hear.

I realize that this may not be the best time to talk about loss. With the overwhelming losses of this pandemic – the loss of jobs and simple human touch and the death of more than 500,000 of our fellow citizens – I suspect we have had enough of loss.

In fact, words and numbers fail the magnitude of all this loss of life. Dave Roberts sent me an article this week that puts things in graphic terms.

For those of you who are visual perceivers, imagine caskets laid end-to-end stretching all the way from New York City to Indianapolis.

For you historical thinkers, this is a death toll greater than all the military deaths in WWII.

If you see things in local terms, imagine the entire population of Atlanta, Georgia gone. Or the loss of all the public school teachers in Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas and Oregon together.

However you perceive it, we are living in days of great loss.

And I am not here this morning to dismiss it or make light of it or to spiritualize it. Loss is real. And it's painful. And sometimes we never fully heal from it.

Some of you were here, but I can only imagine, what it felt like when the news came that beloved Pastor Gus Hintz had died while on vacation in Mexico. It must have been the kind of disorienting loss that comes with a great shock – knowing that he would never return to the great plans he had for this place; knowing he would never stand in that pulpit again; knowing that he would never shake a hand or hug a beloved one. How do you measure that kind of loss?

It's made me think about my own losses – the loss of my closely-guarded façade; the loss of relationships; the loss of a community and a job; the loss of confidence and a vision for myself; the loss of home. Every loss felt like losing everything. They were real and painful and I am still surprised when I discover that there is yet more healing to do.

And yet, if I am honest, there is a kind of power – a kind of resilience – that grew out of those losses. I wouldn't wish them on anyone. But there is a truth in losing your life to save it.

In the first part of the passage for today, Peter dares to rebuke Jesus because, I can imagine, he could deal with the loss of what he left behind. Remember Mark, chapter 1? Simon/Peter and Andrew, James and John had left their fishing business to follow Jesus. James and John even left their father Zebedee sitting in the boat with the hired help.

To be willing to leave things behind– even people – in the service of a great quest is one kind of loss. I remember reading a book several years ago by Judith Viorst called *Necessary Losses* about the losses life demands of us if we are to move on and grow up.

Peter was willing to sustain that loss. But to be told that the one for whom you have left everything is going to suffer and be rejected and killed, leaves nothing.

And that's the point.

As the great Black Gay writer and activist, James Baldwin says, "... the most dangerous creation of any society is that man who has nothing to lose."

I have been re-reading Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. If you have never read it, I encourage you to do so. And if you have read it before, read it again. It's short. But the critique of white America will stick with you for a very long time. It was written in 1963 but it is stunning and searing and so very timely.

And it is, I think, the best commentary about what it means to "take up your cross" and to save your life by losing it.

In fact, Baldwin begins the second part of his book with the words of an old hymn, "Down at the Cross." And he describes being invited to dinner at the home of the Honorable Elijah Muhammed of the Black Nation of Islam. Baldwin had deep philosophical and spiritual differences with the vision of the Nation of Islam. But he saw the wisdom in its analysis about the history of Black folks in white supremacist America.

That night, Baldwin writes, Elijah said to him and the others around the table: "I've come to give you something which can never be taken away from you."

This is the message [Baldwin says] that has spread through the streets and tenements and prisons, through the narcotics wards, and past the filth and sadism of mental hospitals to a people from whom everything has been taken away, including, most crucially, their sense of their own worth. People cannot live without this sense; they do anything whatever to regain it. This is why the most dangerous creation of any society is that man who has nothing to lose. You do not need ten such men – one will do. And Elijah, I should imagine, has had nothing to lose since the day he saw his father's blood rush out – rush down, and splash, so the legend has it, down through the leaves of a tree, on him. But neither did the other men around the table have anything to lose.

I can't help but see the connection here between what James Baldwin describes and what Jesus is saying to Peter. There is a dangerous resilient power that comes with nothing left to lose.

And that power has something to do with what we think about life and what we think about death.

Peter doesn't want to hear any talk about death from the person for whom he has left everything.

But Baldwin says:

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death – ought to decide, indeed, to earn one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life.

Jesus knew that there is a dangerous resilient power that is born of nothing left to lose – living life with no need to deny the fact of death.

I think this is pretty hard for us to hear in this death-denying culture of ours. There is a reason the great Ernest Becker had to write a book about it. Think about the political pressures in this last year to actively deny the death happening all around us. It is astonishing to me that it has only been in the last few weeks that our nation has come together to remember and mourn the thousands of lives we have lost.

But this resilient dangerous power of nothing left to lose is not only about how we see – or don't see – death. Jesus talks openly about death and also about life ... and suffering and rejection.

Baldwin says:

The past, the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it ... hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible – this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering [Baldwin says] ... but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity out of the fire of human cruelty ... knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth – and, indeed, no church – can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is

forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words. If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring ...

[Baldwin goes on] *This apprehension of life here so briefly and inadequately sketched has been the experience of generations of Negroes, and it helps to explain how they have endured and how they have been able to produce children of kindergarten age who can walk through mobs to get to school. It demands great force and great cunning continually to assault the mighty and indifferent fortress of white supremacy, as Negroes in this country have done so long. It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your child to hate.*

As a white person in America, I cannot fully respect this kind of spiritual resilience without repenting of my complicity in the system that created the suffering and rejection in the first place. There is no real respect without repentance: without undermining my own privilege; without handing over power that was never really mine anyway; without risking myself in love.

As I white person in America, I have no right to revel in the beauty and the power of those slave songs without, first, repenting the horrors of slavery that continue to benefit me.

Perhaps there should be a reparations fund and every time someone who looks like me has the audacity of singing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” or “Let Us Break Bread Together” or one of the hundred other favorites we like to sing, a toll is collected acknowledging the honor we do not deserve to sing them.

If the last four years has taught me anything about resilience, it is that there is a power – a dangerous power – in nothing left to lose. And I understand only a small part of that power that lives in the DNA of my African-American sisters and brothers.

Now don’t think all this is without some good news.

Maybe Peter was angry with Jesus because he stopped listening after the part about suffering and rejection and death. Perhaps he missed the part about rising again or “those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Good News, will save it.”

Even James Baldwin has a cautious hope that there is good news for America – that it has both the power and the experience to make revolution real while minimizing human damage. Maybe oppression is inevitable. But, he says:

... at the bottom of my heart I do not believe this. I think that people can be better than that, and I know that people can be better than they are. We are capable of bearing a great burden, once we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is.

Beloved ones, there is a dangerous resilient power in nothing left to lose. And I am haunted by the observation at Elijah Muhammed’s table that you do not need ten such people with that kind of power to change the world – “one will do.”

Are you that one?

Because today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The graphic representation of COVID-19 losses can be found at:

https://apple.news/A2eLJbw_tIw8HyFbz-iUQw Judith Viorst, *Necessary Losses* (Simon & Schuster, 1986). James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage Books, 1963), see (in order of their appearance in this manuscript) pp. 75-76, 91, 98-100, 91.

Music for today's service (provided by Minister of Music, Ben Luedcke):

Summerland

William Grant Still, born 1895, was an accomplished composer completing almost 200 hundred pieces, including opera, ballet, chamber works, and symphonies. As a conductor, he was the first African American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra. Additionally, he was the first black composer to have an opera and a symphony performed by a major American company, and the first black composer to have an opera on national television. He is most commonly known for his first symphony, the *Afro-American Symphony* which for decades was the most commonly performed symphony by an American composer, and incorporates banjo and blues progressions into the modern orchestra. A leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance, Still was a proponent of reviving African American music, dance, art, fashion, literature, and politics. About his first symphony, he stated, "I seek in the 'Afro-American Symphony' to portray not the higher type of colored American, but the sons of the soil, who still retain so many of the traits peculiar to their African forebears; who have not responded completely to the transforming effect of progress."

Ride On King Jesus

William B. McLain cites origins in the text's imagery from the Old Testament (Isaiah 35:8; 40:3) and the gospel's depiction of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Evidence suggests this spiritual had an effect on slave owners and overseers. Eileen Guenther cites this narrative by James Farley, an enslaved African, in her book *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals* (2016).

From UMCdiscipleship.org

James Farley, an enslaved African narrative:

When I was a little boy they would kill us if they caught us in a Sunday School. . . . [W]hen they did let us go to church sometimes, they would give you a seat way back here, with the white folks in front. Then sometimes they would let you come in the evenings to church, and then you would take the front seats, with the padderollers behind, so that if the preacher said something he shouldn't say, they would stop him. One time when they were singing "Ride on King Jesus, No man can hinder Thee," the padderollers told them to stop or they would show him whether they could be hindered or not. (Fisk, 1945, p. 125)

We'll Understand It Better By and By

Dr. Charles Albert Tindley, born 1851, was often referred to as "The Prince of Preachers," he educated himself, became a minister and founded one of the largest Methodist congregations serving the African-American community on the East Coast of the United States. Tindley's father was a slave, but his mother was free. Tindley himself was thus considered to be free, but even so he grew up among slaves. Never able to go to school, Tindley learned independently and by asking people to tutor him. Without any degree, Tindley qualified for ordination in the Methodist Episcopal Church by examination,

with high-ranking scores. Tindley was a noted songwriter and composer of gospel hymns and is recognized as one of the founding fathers of American gospel music. Five of his hymns appear in the 1989 United Methodist Hymnal. His composition "I'll Overcome Someday" is credited to be the basis for "We Shall Overcome."

Peacherine Rag

Scott Joplin, born 1868, was considered the "King of Ragtime," with his most famous piano composition, *Maple Leaf Rag*, becoming the prototype and model for the style that would overtake the country and eventually lead to jazz and swing. Son of a former slave, Joplin learned music from anyone he could. He made a living teaching piano, guitar, and mandolin, though commissions from composing were difficult to secure. Several of his compositions are now lost, with even one of his opera scores being confiscated to repay a debt. His contribution to American music history was mostly forgotten until his piece, *The Entertainer*, was revitalized in the 1970s in the soundtrack of popular film, *The Sting*.