**Weekend of Sunday, September 3, 2023**

**14th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 22/Year A**

**First Reading: Jeremiah 15:15-21**

**Second Reading: Romans 12:9-21**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:21-28**

**Sermon Title: *“Transformed by Love, Faith, and Sacrifice”***

**Theme**

*The prophet Jeremiah speaks of the incurable wound of his suffering yet finds in God’s words the delight of his heart. When Peter doesn’t grasp Jesus’ words about suffering, Jesus tells the disciples they will find their lives in losing them. Such sacrificial love is described by Paul when he urges us to associate with the lowly and not repay evil with evil. In worship we gather as a community that we might offer ourselves for the sake of our suffering world.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Jeremiah 15:15-21**

 15O Lord, you know;
  remember me and visit me,
  and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors.
 In your forbearance do not take me away;
  know that on your account I suffer insult.
 16Your words were found, and I ate them,
  and your words became to me a joy
  and the delight of my heart;
 for I am called by your name,
  O Lord, God of hosts.
 17I did not sit in the company of merrymakers,
  nor did I rejoice;
 under the weight of your hand I sat alone,
  for you had filled me with indignation.

 18Why is my pain unceasing,
  my wound incurable,
  refusing to be healed?
 Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook,
  like waters that fail.

 19Therefore thus says the Lord:
 If you turn back, I will take you back,
  and you shall stand before me.
 If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
  you shall serve as my mouth.
 It is they who will turn to you,
  not you who will turn to them.
 20And I will make you to this people
  a fortified wall of bronze;
 they will fight against you,
  but they shall not prevail over you,
 for I am with you
  to save you and deliver you,
 says the Lord.
 21I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked,
  and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

**Second Reading: Romans 12:9-21**

9Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.
 14Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” 21Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

**Gospel: Matthew 16:21-28**

21From that time on, [after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah,] 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. 22And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” 23But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”
 24Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?
 27“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

**Sermon**

Today, we are going to explore three powerful passages that are prescribed for today, because, I think, no, I know if we take them to heart and apply them to our own lives, these verses offer profound insights into our journey of faith, the transformative power of love, and the call to take up our crosses and follow Jesus.

Now, there may be some in the audience who live lives so blessed that nothing ever goes off the rails.

* Your health is great.
* You’ve made all the right decisions in your life.
* Your spouse is perfect for you.
* Your children are smart and good-looking.
* Your career, if you are still working, is challenging and fulfilling.
* And if you are retired, you are proud of your accomplishments and now you are enjoying the fruits of your labors, surrounded by family and friends doing all the things you’ve wanted to do.

If I’ve described you, then this sermon is not for you. Sit there quietly and play on your phone.

Jeremiah, the prophet and author of the First Reading, was given a difficult assignment. He was in ministry from about 626 BCE until sometime after 587 BCE. Already by this time, the united Kingdom of Israel had split and the northern tribe of Israel had fallen to the Babylonians. During Jeremiah’s ministry, the southern tribe of Judah also succumbed to the Babylonians.

We faithful Christians might ask, “How could God let this happen?” I am so glad you asked. God has never been interested in the human concepts of success and failure. In the OT days, God was only interested in faithfulness to Him and His way, as detailed in the Law of Moses in all of its 613 laws, ordinances, and commands. And God, being jealous for his people’s faithfulness, loved His people so much that He sent them priests, prophets, and judges to guide them in their faithfulness.

But God also loved them so much that He allowed them to choose not to love Him back, to be unfaithful, and to wander at their peril. Although the Old Testament says a lot about punishment, from my own experience, I know that when I wander from the path of faithfulness, and inevitably end up in trouble, I only blame myself. I don’t blame God. But I digress.

Jeremiah has a nickname, the “weeping prophet” and he earned that nickname because, given

* he ministered in the worst time of Israel’s history,
* and he was persecuted because no one wanted to hear what he had to say,
* and he was constantly threatened with death, and was eventually thrown into a cistern to die,

he was a whiner. We see it in the First Reading. In the first half of the reading, Jeremiah was telling the LORD how faithful he had been even though no one would heed his warnings. But toward the end of that first half, Jeremiah had a little pity party for himself and whined to God.

Then in the second half, the LORD responded by telling him that the success or failure of the mission he was given was not his concern. He will receive the LORD’s reward for his faithfulness no matter his success or failure in human terms. And by the way, though there is no biblical account of his death, legend has it that he was stoned to death by his fellow Israelites in exile in Egypt. An inspiring and uplifting message, I know.

You that never experienced anything like this, who are playing with your phones, are just wagging your heads in wonder, aren’t you?

However, Jeremiah did the right thing in crying out to the LORD. In Jeremiah, we find the prophet's anguish and his source of strength. Amid his trials, he turned to God's Word as his refuge. When we face challenges, we must remember that the Word of God is our anchor. Like Jeremiah, we can cry out to God, trusting in His promises to sustain us.

The Second Reading from Romans is a hard right turn. Paul’s ministry was not that of a prophet, but that of an evangelist and teacher. In this particular passage, Paul called his readers to behave with genuine love, to hate what is evil, and to cling to what is good. But he went further and encouraged his readers to bless those who persecute them and live in harmony with one another. And, Paul was not exhorting behavior between Christians or others in the Roman community of believers exclusively, but anyone – non-Christians, their mortal enemies, those who persecute them, and even those who may try to kill them, and succeed in killing others of the fellowship. Can you imagine doing that?

Living here in the United States of America where religious freedom is guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, I doubt any of us will ever experience persecution for our faith. But the other side of Paul’s teaching may be as difficult for us today as it ever has been:

* tolerance for others not like us,
* love others first,
* bless and do not curse,
* be humble,
* feed the hungry,
* quench the thirst of the thirsty,
* and on and on.

So much good teaching on the life of discipleship under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

This passage reminds us that love isn't just a feeling but a way of life. When we love sincerely and sacrificially, we reflect Christ's love to the world.

The Gospel Reading from Matthew follows last week’s Gospel Reading, the confession of Peter, directly. So having revealed who he truly is, “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” Jesus took a left turn and revealed his impending suffering and death. And he called his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him – I wonder what they thought he meant by that? He told his disciples, that there would be a cost to their discipleship. They must willingly sacrifice their desires for His will. And when they do this, they will find the true meaning of life – losing themselves to find Christ; becoming less of their sinful selves and becoming more like Him.

These teachings of Jesus are timeless, not meant just for the twelve he was talking to, but to all who carry his name, Christian. So all that he said, applies to us too.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Now, let's tie these passages together. In times of trial, as Jeremiah faced, we find strength in God's Word. The path God calls us to may not always be easy or glorious, but God will never abandon us. Hard or light duty, the faithful disciple soldiers on with the goal of faithfulness. How do we do that? Another great question!

According to Paul’s letter to the Romans, in our daily lives, we are to express our faith through genuine humility and love for all people, and so much more – that was such a powerful passage.

And from Jesus our Lord himself, in the Gospel of Matthew, we learn that in our journeys of faith, we are to embrace the cross, recognizing that true transformation into His likeness comes through sacrifice – not necessarily of flesh and blood, but the sacrifice of our selfish ambitions, greed, and desire for the things of the flesh, and instead, find joy in service to others following the example of Jesus.

So, how do we apply these teachings to our lives? I’m so glad you asked. We read God's Word daily, seeking His guidance and strength in all circumstances through prayer and meditation. In our Bible study, prayer, and meditation we learn what God expects of us, and through our example of godly living, Jesus Christ, we can see how it looks, so we can go and do likewise. We let love be the driving force behind our actions, treating everyone with kindness and compassion. We take up our cross, following Jesus wholeheartedly, even when it's challenging.

And in conclusion, these verses remind us that our faith is not passive; it's transformative. As we abide in God's Word, live out His love, and carry our crosses, we become beacons of light in a world filled with darkness. Let us commit ourselves today to walk this path of love, faith, and sacrifice, knowing that through Christ, we can truly be transformed, and be agents of transformation in the world.

**Prayer**

Almighty God, in the self-giving love of Christ, you have revealed the path of salvation. Give us courage to deny our selfish desires and bear the cross of discipleship, so that we may live as those who have no fear of death, and receive the joy of everlasting life. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen