

Proper 17 Year A

“For those who want to save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

I was looking at a website just the other day called, “Trade as One.” It’s a website that promotes fair trade....there are many sites like it....and like the other sites it promotes doing business directly with artisans and merchants around the planet, by-passing profit takers in the middle....the theory being that such a practice creates sustainable ways of making a living for people of the world in which the odds of doing so are at a scant minimum.

The presenter in the video at the Trade for One site very simply put things in perspective for me: He demonstrated the classic pie chart that has been shown I’m sure at many a stewardship gathering....The pie had a different color slice that equaled ten percent of the entire pie which is the amount the church has taught over the years as the appropriate amount of money, time and talent that we are supposed to give to the church....the other 90% was the rest of our spending lives, that other world outside our doors....The presenter pointed out that the percentage of what people country wide actually give to the church is on average less than two percent... and I’m afraid that pie chart with the slim slice of church up and against the vastness of the rest of our lives is emblazoned on the mainstream cultural psyche... The presenter proposed: what if the entire pie....what if one hundred percent were given for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of bringing in God’s kingdom....God’s egalitarian commonweal....In other words...what if the way we spent our money, spent our time and our talent, the way we lived our lives, the other 98% was always, always for the good of the whole....the way and from whom we buy our groceries and other goods....how we behave as consumers....do we know the hiring and wage practices, workplace conditions and philanthropic dispositions of the companies from whom we consume....are we attentive to this habitat we call earth to the extent that we are the faithful stewards of it as we are called to be in our daily living....do we vote for people whose records reflect the gospel imperatives of taking care of the weak among us....do we really call our leaders to account....do we research and intelligently call out injustice when we see it...I’m speaking here of a predisposition that has been willed to us at our baptisms, a legacy of world changing, that pervades our every living moment...and that is quite simply to love our neighbor....Job one as a

card carrying member of God's Commonweal is to see to the dignity and well being of our neighbor...we are our brothers keeper...all else serves that.

Now we good people of conscience do a lot of talking about this way of life...I just did some talking to the Press Register...but talk is cheap, and that probably applies to us clerics as much as anyone....But somehow we must bridge the gap between being saying people of faith and doing people of faith....and dare I say, I think we're getting there here at All Saints....the community of Mobile certainly sees us that way....and with the resources we have we do pretty well doing for our neighbor....But it is not enough according to Matthew... God wants all of us and all that we have, and all that we are.

That is what Matthew's gospel reading today is about....actually it is about two things: It is about giving ourselves...losing our souls(the word for life is literally translated soul) for the sake of the world....the word losing means an utter giving over, a releasing of the whole of our lives...100% of the pie for the sake of the greater good....to save our lives according to Matthew means withholding our lives...living for ourselves, saving our souls for something other....but there is no other... We are to lose...lose our lives, which in the mythy mystery of the kingdom of God, means to bring about shared abundance....abundance....not everyone eking out an existence as if the riches of the world, the riches of God's commonweal were scarce....which is an ethos under which we operate as the human community to this day... a theology of scarcity.....no the mystery is that we are meant to live, that we are created to live in sustainable abundance. It is a big enough pie... that's the point of the feeding stories in this gospel... so again, the question remains for us....a question we must continue to live with....How do we live a faith that is a doing faith, and a faith that touches every aspect of our lives, and therefore touches the lives of the many.... There is an ancient Iranian saying which I suspect was not lost to the Semitic gospel writers...and that is that our souls exist only to be planted into the soil of the world...Matthew's parable of the seeds points to such a metaphor... I want to say that if we are all in....if our life of faith lived out in our world matters to us more than all else...and I think that is a conscious choice we make daily...a discipline, an act of the will...it doesn't come from warm fuzziness...It comes from a mature awareness of who we are, which again is a daily process....then I think the bridge between saying and doing collapses, and we find ourselves hard at work...and we begin seeing signs of the commonweal all around us....justice and peace and shared fraternity and dignity and well being and non-violence...the fruits of our labor, the fruits of God's commonweal.

The constant question my children have of me, and some of you as well, is, where does institutional church fit into this paradigm of life Matthew calls us into....in fact Jesus himself was intensely critical of the religious institution of his day....and there's plenty of criticism for the church in our own day....they ask, "can't we do good in our world without ascribing to the theological formulas handed down by the hierarchy?" That's my paraphrase... actually they ask...can't we save the world and sleep in Sunday morning?"....and the answer of course is yes they can....yes we can.....but there is one peculiarity about us humans that we can't ignore... or I should say if we ignore it we ignore it at our peril.....and that is our need to gather as community....the Greeks called it ecclesia...from which we get the word ecclesiastical....ecclesia which means gathered assembly....It was first spoken about that we know of in the early writings of Plato....that in the gathered assembly...and Plato intended the gathered assembly to be relevant to matters secular and sacred which weren't categorized apart as we do today....But he noted that in gathered assembly....that the whole was greater than the parts....that in community matters of importance evoked energy and imagination....that the primordial knowledge of being people of one blood somehow energized us for the greater good....I would say it this way...that we gather together as people of faith to remind ourselves of who we are and for what we are made; that's living in intentional relationship...and in our liturgical tradition we believe that that should be done beautifully....because that we are made in the image of God is a beautiful thing....a world changing thing...a doing thing that makes all the difference...we are exponentially stronger together...and celebrate that in relationship we must... and if we fail to gather and remind ourselves of this truth deep within our DNA, then we will forget....we will forget who we are and for what we are made.

We gather as ecclesia around the table of God and partake of the food which will sustain us for the work ahead....a shared meal in which all participate equally...an image, a high metaphor of a meal well taken...a hint at the nature of this blossoming commonweal, remember? A commonweal in which the whole is greater than the parts, which means that the work of this people gathered and nurtured will bear fruit exponentially, remember?

So exactly who are we... a rhetorical question? Well let me remind you as we get reminded each time the bread and wine are shared....let me remind you that it is us, our very souls there on that altar....that is us no different from the Christ himself, we Christ's body and blood...our bodies and blood blessed broken and given for the well being and dignity of our world....we dare not forget that....It is us who are to be eaten and drunk as

nurture for the weak among us....So it is the whole of us for our world...our minds, our imaginations our creativity, our sound judgment, our learning all for the world...our bodies and our blood no less.

The other point Matthew makes is that this fellowship is flawed from the beginning...Peter the exemplar of the church itself, a real sayer, talking cheap...Just a few lines before our reading today, Jesus is calling Peter the cornerstone of the church and here he calls him Satan...then just lines later Peter is witness to Jesus' so-called transfiguration...Peter privy, like Moses himself, seeing The Glory of God in Jesus...and then later Peter abandons Jesus and denies even knowing him....the good news is that this gathered people Matthew describes...this sacred and secular ecclesia, one world, one life, the whole pie....this fellowship that gathers as often as we might are people like me and you...The church even at its best is built upon ambiguous ground...because life is that way....ambiguous, tenuous, contingent on things we can't control....so the church embraces such a life and bids us give that life away for the sake of the good that arrives in God's good time...perhaps even as soon as now, perhaps as we speak.

But what is not ambiguous, what is not equivocal is that we are to be all in.... we are to give the whole of who we are....all in for this divine life meant for our world, the life of which God dreams for this world, and depends on us to bear it, to make it so....We are all in, body and blood...that is who we are and what we are for....body and blood for the world's sake...and in the name of our God who is all in all...let us never, never forget.