**September 13, 2015 The Rev. Carenda Baker**

**16th Sunday after Pentecost Mark 8:27-38**

LIFE. It’s a precious thing, isn’t it, a precious, Spirit-breathed, God-given gift. So, how are you doing, living your one wild and precious life?

Hunter Thompson wrote: “Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out and loudly proclaiming, “Whoo hoo, what a ride!”

It’s a rather provocative image, isn’t it? How do we move toward living that kind of full, rich and exuberant life? How do we find ***life*** and live it with joyful abandon?

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus says we find life by letting go of it, by being willing to give it up, by losing it. I don’t know about you, but I’m not usually very keen on losing things, especially important and good things like friends, community, physical abilities, familiarity and safety.

Jesus has this conversation with the disciples about his identity and losing life in Caesarea Philippi. It’s worth our paying attention to the setting where this happens. Caesarea Philippi was and is a beautiful place. In Jesus’ day, Caesarea Philippi represented two key cultural influences: It was the center of the worship of the god Pan and other lesser deities, and it was a recreation and rehabilitation center for the Roman army. In other words, it was a place of religious, political and military power. Here in this place of extremely concentrated earthly power, Jesus first takes a poll of what people are saying about him, and then he asks the disciples that piercing and troubling question, “Who do YOU say that I am?”

Though the disciples were not bombarded with 5,000 advertising images each day like we are, they still imagined the secret to life was strength and power, rather than vulnerability and love. It is instinctual to push back against suffering and pain, loss and rejection, which is what Jesus told them he would soon be facing. No wonder Peter responded so strongly, rebuking Jesus, telling him he was most certainly mistaken. Messiahs are strong and powerful. They are not rejected and they don’t die.

It was not an attractive or desirable picture of the future Jesus described for them. And it had to be so difficult for Jesus to live into and out of God’s alternative reality. It’s no wonder Jesus rebukes Peter right back so strongly: “Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” It was almost impossible for Peter and the other disciples to imagine there could be another, radical, counter-cultural way of seeing and living reality day to day. Dying? Losing life? No one wants to lose important things like power, possessions, position, and prestige. This IS the stuff of life – or at least that’s what the culture we live and breathe in teaches us and would have us believe defines us.

But Jesus is following a completely different, divinely rewritten script. Jesus’ script teaches things like the attitudes of God’s kingdom come: “Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for right relationship. Blessed are the peacemakers”.

The script Jesus follows says that you are blessed and truly free when you are free of yourself, freed from self-preoccupation so you can easily and readily reach out your hand in compassion to another. You are truly free when you have nothing to prove, protect, or promote. Free and unafraid of losing is a desirable way to live. Desirable and difficult. Can we really find life by losing it, by relaxing our grip on what seems to promise security and stability?

Franciscan Roman Catholic priest Richard Rohr writes: “Authentic spirituality is always on some level or in some way about letting go. We become free as we let go of our three primary energy centers: our need for power and control, our need for safety and security, and our need for affection and esteem.”

At the very beginning of my Anglican studies year in 2013 at The School of Theology of The University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, Dean Neil Alexander posed a most challenging and provocative question. He said, “Each morning I think – what would it be like for me to live today with an “undefended heart”? I have been pondering and living into that question for the past two years.

In my time with you here at St. Andrew’s in these past nine months, I have been gradually learning to live a bit more with an undefended heart. I think this is the way Jesus lived – not unaware of the surrounding and prevailing reality, but being open and vulnerable, taking risks for the sake of something better than preserving life and self-image. Taking risks for the sake of love.

Richard Rohr describes this way of losing and living in writing about St. Francis of Assisi and his friend Clare. He writes: “They died into the life that they loved instead of living in fear of any death that could end their life. They were both so very eager to love, and they somehow knew that dying to the old and unneeded was an essential part of living this love at any depth. Most of us do not seem to know that – and we resist all change.”

Letting go and “losing” our lives to God for the sake of love allows us to find true life and our authentic, true selves. Jesus gives us God’s invitation to take a different road. Losing life to find life. It’s not a very heavily traveled road, because it is difficult and yet at the same time can be wondrous. The unexpected lies just beyond each bend – things like grace, beauty, forgiveness, community.

Thank you, Mother Barbara and dear friends for welcoming and embracing me as part of the St. Andrew’s family. Thank you for the privilege and joy of sharing this road of ministry in Christ’s name for a brief time. I pray you will go on now and continue to lose your lives for the sake of love – a call I know I will be living into for the rest of my days. Self-sacrificing love is the way of the cross, and it is the best way to find life with all its wild and precious Divine possibilities. And wow, what a ride it has been and will continue to be! Thanks be to God. Amen.