

*To Save Life*  
*Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder*  
*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*  
*September 12, 2021 Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost*  
*Psalm 116:1-9; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-36*

**Call to Worship:** Today is a service about the greatest hope we have as individuals, as a species and as a planet.

Jesus said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

But he also said, “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 gospel, will save it.”

The hope that could save us combines these two seemingly opposite teachings.

Buddhist teachers talk about the need for both effort and ease. Our hope lies in combining the effort of the heavy cross and losing our life with the ease of a light burden and rest, the effort of facing honestly the severity of the crises we face and all the grief, anger and despair they can cause, with the ease of faith that by following the way of the Spirit, the way of love and compassion, justice and mercy, we can help create the realm of God on earth.

The hymn “For the Healing of the Nations” gives beautiful expression to this hope. It was written for Human Rights Day in 1965 by Fred Kaan who grew up in the Netherlands during Nazi occupation. His parents were in the resistance and hid Jews in their home like Corrie Ten Boom whose book *The Hiding Place* Debbie mentioned last week. Kaan became a Congregational minister in England, a tireless worker for global justice and peace and a prolific hymn writer—pastor, prophet and poet. Let us worship together singing, “For the Healing of the Nations.”

For the healing of the nations,  
God, we pray with one accord;  
for a just and equal sharing  
of the things that earth affords;  
To a life of love in action  
help us rise and pledge our word.

Lead us forward into freedom;  
from despair your world release,  
that, redeemed from war and hatred,

all may come and go in peace.  
Show us how through care and goodness  
fear will die and hope increase.

All that kills abundant living,  
let it from the earth be banned;  
pride of status, race or schooling,  
dogmas that obscure your plan.  
In our common quest for justice  
may we hallow life's brief span.

You, Creator God, have written  
your great name on humankind;  
for our growing in your likeness  
bring the life of Christ to mind,  
that by our response and service  
earth its destiny may find.

**Time with the Children:** Good morning! At the very center of the Gospel and the center of all Jesus taught is the saying that we need to lose our life to save our life. Jesus asked what good it would be if we gained the whole world but lost our life in the process?

This is really important to understand and apply to our lives, and it is also really hard to understand, so we need to think about it again and again in different ways.

One way is to think about a notorious monkey trap. Monkeys do not want to be trapped, they want to live freely in their jungles, but here is a way that some people have invented to capture them. They hollow out a coconut and attach it to a rope, and tie the rope around a tree. Then they take an orange that just exactly fits through the hole they used to hollow it out, and squeeze the orange down into the coconut.

Then they go away and leave the coconut for a monkey to find. The monkey smells the orange and puts his little hand through the hole and grabs the orange and tries to get it out, but it won't come out with his fingers around it, the hole is too small. The monkey will not stop trying even when a human comes up and throws a bag over him and ties him up and takes him away.

He is trapped because he won't drop the orange. He could be free if he could just let go of what he desires, but he can't. The thing that Jesus knew is that people are like that, too. We can't let go of what we want even when it is trapping us and we can't get free, even when it is harmful to us, we still hold on tightly to what we have or think.

Many a child has been caught at the cookie jar because she had her hand on what she wanted when she heard her mother's footstep. Whole birthday parties can be ruined when just one thing does not go the way a child wants and she can't let go.

So when we are trapped by our desires, clinging to that orange in the coconut that is ruining our life, there is something we can do that those trapped monkeys seem not to know how to do...

Prayer that lets go and turns to God restores our sanity, it calls upon a power greater than our appetite and desire and that higher power can lead us to freedom, safety and peace. Prayer helps us lose our life to save our life, let go of our will and let God's will be done. So let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

### **Sermon: *To Save Life***

One of the stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of early Christianity goes like this: a monk was keeping vigil in the chapel one night when suddenly a swarm of devils invaded and blew out candles and ripped the stuffing out of cushions. The monk fought them off the best he could, but then the great devil, Satan himself appeared and dragged the monk toward the door. He was almost vanquished but he grabbed the doorpost and cried out, "Jesus, help!" Immediately all the devils were gone and the monk was on the floor at Jesus' feet. "Where were you?" the monk moaned. Jesus replied, "I was here all along, all you had to do was call."

The 116th Psalm says, "The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on your name: 'O God, I pray, save my life!' ...When I was brought low, you saved me.... You have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling."

It can make the difference between life and death where we look for help—whether we call on our own ego strength or call on God's higher power. Every member of a 12 Step Group like Alcoholics Anonymous knows that the key to being saved from the destruction of addiction is to turn from our ego's self-will and hand over our will and our life to God.

President George W. Bush was a reformed alcoholic who said that our nation was addicted to oil. He was right, and we as individuals and as a people are addicted to far more than alcohol

and fossil fuels. Human egos are addicted to all kinds of selfishness, and all our egos together are addicted to a way of life leading toward the death of humanity and the planet.

So it is crucial that we glean all the wisdom we can from the scriptures and hymns today about how to tame the ego to serve the Spirit.

The letter of James goes into a diatribe about the human tongue, but the blameful tongue in this passage is only a tool of the selfish side of our ego. The tongue or ego can also be a tool in the service of goodness. Jesus taught that our bellies can be the source of appetites that destroy our lives or can be springs of the living, life-giving water of the Spirit. From the same mouth can come cursing or blessing.

Jesus called Peter Satan, “For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” He calls us to lose our life to save our life, to die to human things and live immersed in and full of divine things.

This is the central teaching, the core of all that Jesus taught, more central even than the great commandments of love of God and love of neighbor as our self, because without losing our life, without overcoming our selfish ego’s control, we cannot hope to practice that love, and we cannot be free to fulfill our calling as part of the movement to create God’s realm on earth, a sustainable, just, peaceful and healthy planet for generations to come.

So how can we do it? How can we bridle the ego to live in service of the Spirit?

It seems miraculous that at this time of history when taming the ego is of paramount importance for the survival of life on earth we have seen huge growth in the skills and practices we need, in both psychology and spirituality. The work of Carl Jung, Marsha Linehan and Thomas Keating, to name just three, intentionally combines psychology and spirituality in powerful ways.

Perhaps the most effective tool in the Christian tradition comes from Keating’s Centering Prayer movement. It is called the Welcoming Prayer or Welcoming Practice. It leads us through a few steps in common with other traditions.

First, we cultivate mindfulness to be aware when powerful thoughts and emotions well up.

Second, we allow ourselves to sink into the physical manifestations caused by those thoughts and feelings, such as muscle tension, rapid breathing, increased body temperature or heartbeat.

Third, we go through a litany of letting go of attachments or desires that our ego may be addicted to, that may be knocking us out of connection with the Holy Spirit. These include our exaggerated concerns about winning approval or affection, or assuring our security or survival, or maintaining power or control—all things that we need to some degree but that can set our mind on human things and not divine things.

We let go of them all including the perfectionist desire to change the situation and instead we hand over our will and life to God. We welcome the situation just as it is, resting in trust that losing our life in this way will save it, that the Spirit will serve us better than our selfish ego. We send that message from our spirit to our ego every time we catch our ego rising to usurp the Spirit's place.

We can do the entire process within a minute or two if we practice, and we can do it many times a day as we see our ego trying to take over from the Spirit as the driver of our bus. It is an extremely effective path to transformation.

Another miraculous development in the last century has been in social change. Humanity has undergone leaps of consciousness in history, such as the Enlightenment at the dawn of the Age of Reason in the 17th Century. Only in the past hundred years have social scientists, spiritual leaders and political activists studied and carried out experiments in how to speed such changes.

Social scientist Margaret Mead observed, based on her research: “Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Spiritual leader and activist Martin Luther King Jr. said: “This hour of history needs a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists.”

Mead's and King's wisdom was confirmed in 2011 when a group of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute social scientists did a study funded by the United States Army and Navy research offices. They found that a culture will make a dramatic and rapid shift of consciousness when a committed and passionately dedicated minority becomes 10% of a society.

Committed, passionately dedicated, transformed nonconformists—this is exactly what Jesus was calling his disciples to become as fishers of people: a movement of those who have lost their ego-driven lives to save their Spirit-led lives, who have lost their selfishness to live fully as citizens of God's realm of self-giving love and establish that realm on earth.

The scriptures this week and every week call us to be those committed, passionately dedicated transformed nonconformists in our community, nation and world.

Let us pray in silence, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us in that direction...

**Haiku by Mel Goertz:**

When bumblebees  
burrow into the pollen,  
the whole tree hums and hums.