

Lent 2, Yr B, February 28, 2018
Emmanuel Hastings
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Earlier this week, I noticed Michael's ring on the windowsill in the kitchen, not his wedding ring but a silver ring made by his cousin, a silversmith in Taos, New Mexico.

I picked it up and held it in the palm of my hand, feeling its heft, admiring its beauty, and looking at some scratches on it. I looked at its inner surface, half-expecting to see some words in elven script.

I hope most of you are somewhat familiar with *The Lord of the Rings*, the epic novels of J.R.R. Tolkien.

I shook off a shiver, reminding myself that it was Michael's ring, not Frodo's, and though it was beautiful and precious to Michael, it was not a ring of power, and had no chilling words inscribed within it.

But made me think of old Bilbo on his birthday, when he is about to go spend his last years in Rivendell with the elves.

He plans to leave his ring for his favorite nephew, Frodo, but he finds he just can't do it. He can't let go of it.

He puts it into an envelope and sets it up on the mantle, but he can't pull his hand away, and there it is, back in his hand, envelope on the floor.

He means to give it to Frodo, really he does. But it has a hold on him, on his mind and spirit, and keeping it as he wants to would ultimately be his undoing.

Fortunately, the wizard Gandalf intervenes and sends Frodo and the ring to Mt Doom where it is undone itself and its power broken.

Anyway, thinking about *The Lord of the Rings*, one of my favorite books of all times, it occurred to me that at least in a way, our lives are like Bilbo's ring.

Different in some major ways: the ring was made by an evil energy, our lives are amazingly made in love; the ring's purpose is to destroy by exerting power over, the purpose of our lives is abundant joy.

BUT, in the story, Bilbo's ring takes hold of him, pulls his will into itself, causes him to hold it tight, to keep it under his control, making him into a smaller, paler, less real version of himself.

In a similar way, when we perceive our lives as belonging solely to ourselves, when we start believing that we are in control, when we are driven by fear to focus on saving our own skins, we have begun to lose our lives.

Jesus calls us to something completely different. Hold your life lightly, says Jesus. It is yours, yes, but it is yours to give away.

Episcopal singer-songwriter Bob Franke wrote these lyrics for the wedding of some friends of his:

Make love to each other, be free with each other, be prisoners of love 'til you lie in the sod. Make friends with each other, forgive one another, see God in each other, be beggars to God."

Beggars to God. Everything that we have has been given us. Our lives and certainly all our stuff has never really been ours, not to hold onto in fear.

The more we live out of fear, the more we live in bondage. The more we live out of fear, the more fear takes hold of us, the tighter our grasp becomes, and the less capable we are of experiencing joy, freedom, hope, grace, peace, and certainly love.

So how can we live with that kind of freedom, freedom to love our lives and still let them go?

We don't live in the time of Jesus or of the early church or in places where our lives are forfeit for being followers of Jesus. How do we lose our lives for the sake of the gospel?

It's a great question and I don't know the answer. I would love to have a discussion and hear what you all think.

However, in our time and place, it seems to me that holding our lives lightly might begin with holding possessions lightly, being generous, not just with money but with time.

Being generous with our attention in listening to each other, not just thinking about and planning our next response.

Being generous with forgiveness, and empathy, and our God-given talents. Holding our lives lightly might mean holding our opinions and perceptions lightly,

being willing to consider the opinions and perceptions of others, even changing our minds.

Jesus calls his disciples to self-denial, taking up a cross, and following him. "In the context of Mark's Gospel, to deny ourselves involves more than giving up chocolate for Lent or belittling ourselves...

Rather, it is a call to radically reorient our lives so that we [are seeking not] our own priorities but those of Jesus Christ."

The cross has to do with being vulnerable, as well as being “willing to suffer the consequences” the dominant culture imposes on faithfulness to God’s commands to welcome the stranger or to care for the poor or to speak truth to power.

And to follow Jesus is to risk choices “that promise to be both dangerous and life-giving.”

And why do this? Because of love. Because we have been loved. Because we dare to trust. Because we are members of a covenant of relationship centered in and manifested by the loving-kindness of God.

The first giving of the covenant was at creation, when God breathed out God’s Spirit, sang out God’s Word song, and all things came into being.

Last week the Hebrew Scripture lesson was about the Noah covenant, the rainbow, God’s promise agreement, made not just with Noah and his family, but – I love this –

“...with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark, ...every living creature of all flesh.”

In this week’s lesson, God goes further and makes a covenant with one man, Abram, promising him that at age 99 he will become the ancestor of as many descendants as the stars of the heavens.

God changes his name to Abraham to mark this promise, and then God goes further.

“I will establish my covenant between me and you, ...for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you, and to your offspring after you.”

I will be God to you.

There is this succession of covenants, each a little more particular, and at the same time, a little more inclusive of personhood:

the covenant of creation itself, the covenant made with Noah, the covenant made with Abraham, and the covenant made with Moses at Sinai.

In each of the covenants, in a slightly more personal way each time, there is the message “I will be God to you.”

And this is what I think. In the Incarnation of Jesus, God once again is expressing God’s covenantal loving-kindness, “I will be God to you.”

You are my beloved. I love you. I treasure you. I pour out myself for you. Your selfhood is so precious to me that it is utterly safe for you to hold your own selfhood lightly.

You can be as free as I am, in giving yourself away, because in me you have an eternal life.

The Eucharist is the Sacrament of that Covenant, God's own life given for us and to us, in order to take root within us. But the Eucharist is also the Sacrament of Self-giving, because it is not just for us, not just to feed us.

Look at it this way. We say that the Sacramental Bread and Wine are the Body of Christ, given for our salvation.

We take the bread, bless it, break it and give it; those are the four movements of the Eucharist.

But we also say that we are the Body of Christ. We, the people of God, gathered here this morning, soon to come forward to the altar, are also the Body of Christ.

And Christ takes us. Christ lifts us to bless us. And then we are broken open, yes, broken open and given, given for the life of the world God loves.

If we are intent upon saving our own lives, staying intact, unwilling to love, unwilling to allow love to break us open, we will find that our lives have evaporated.

But if we give ourselves, broken open by love, bursting with good news of God's love, we will find that God's life in us will make our lives far more beautiful, more joyous, more peaceful than we could have ever imagined.

"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."

As we gather here in a community of trust and covenant love, may we receive grace to live God's love in a loveless world. Amen.