

SERMON- Proper 17 (A)

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Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalms 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

August 30, 2026

Matthew 16:21-28

OPENING:

I saw her... once... in the flesh (.... maybe you did too over these last 80 years.) I was in Nashville, Tennessee at the Gaylord Convention Center in the audience for the televised special of "CMT's 100 Greatest Love Songs of Country Music" And there she was at #1: Dolly Parton and "I Will Always Love You."¹

Last week, I talked a little bit about the Bible, and our favorites parts of it. I asked: What are the verses and passages that stick with you? What are those that we, as Episcopalians and as individuals, carry with us as special totems and charms, watchword and phrases of great significance?

After "St. Dolly's" death this week:

I have been reflecting on her 1973 classic "I Will Always Love You" and where it might fit in as a bit of *secular*, or maybe just sacred, Scripture.

GOSPEL:

First, though, in our Gospel last week, if you recall, featured Peter's stunning, life-altering, world-changing confession at Caesarea Philippi.

Jesus had asked the disciples: "who do you say that I am?" Peter had stood up, puffed his chest and said: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Jesus replied to him: "You are Peter—the rock upon which the church will rest... here are the keys to the kingdom of heaven."

From that amazing height of last week to this, in just five short verses in Matthew Chapter 16, we witness Peter's stunning fall from grace.

Peter has gone from the "Rock upon which the church will rest" to a "stumbling block." Today Jesus says: "Get behind me Satan."

That swift change is certainly a lesson in humility for us in our own faith lives.

Peter: he would have better days than this one... and worse ones.

Peter's life and "career" would seemingly be ruined by his denial of Jesus by the fire during the Passion, but he would soon be redeemed by Jesus and next score a series of #1 hits in the Acts of the Apostles, and then, finally, be the first inducted into the Hall of Fame, the Grand Ol' Opry of Christendom, as first Bishop of Rome.

¹ [CMT 100 Greatest Love Songs of Country Music \(TV Special 2004\) - IMDb](#)

Now, when I preach this passage, I usually think about examples of discipleship, that are like Peter's, and like the rest of the disciples:

titanic figures whose lives proceeded just as Jesus predicted, with valorous service, with no small amount of failure, and then a death of martyrdom. Maybe Hank Williams from the Country music world, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr. from the "real world."

These are men, and they are usually men, who have, as we will sing today, said: "I have decided to follow Jesus" and who have "Take(n) up their cross as thy Savior said." These are valorous, dynamic, action-filled examples of discipleship.

Jesus' call to discipleship today is famous for its "brevity" and for its "extremity" but what about a call that is lengthy, that is not a one-time decision, but one that stretches out over a lifetime of triumph and sadness.²

In other words, what would Peter have done over 80 years of ministry, as his skin wrinkled and his gifts and talents faded? What would carrying the cross look like then? Day after day, 9 to 5, after 9 to 5?

What about other examples of discipleship, no less faithful, perhaps even famous, but don't have the Call-Acceptance-Death model?

DOLLY PARTON:

I don't have time to recount all of Dolly Parton's achievements and life accomplishments: musician, actress, businesswoman, philanthropist and, of all things—in our culture that is **so** divided and polarized—she became a sort of cultural saint that people cared about and were often astonished by.

So I think back to that concert, 20+ years ago now, and I remember a few things:

1) First, the whole thing was very... tacky.

Maybe you already knew this, but for a televised special, if a microphone does not work or a solitary hair is out of place, they have to go back and tape the segment over again. In the audience, you have to pretend like the whole thing is live and that you were just enthusiastic as you were the first time.

Is there not a lesson for spiritual faith lives there?

For constancy, for habits of faith, for liturgical worship?

Tackiness, though, is something, of course, that Dolly Parton had been accused of being, and something that she wore as a badge of honor, all her life.

² Susan B.W. Johnson "Pastoral Perspective." 2013. (Matthew 16:24-28) in Cynthia Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds. *Feasting on the Gospel* (Volume 2.) Presbyterian: 56.

People would say that she was too dumb, too blonde, too whatever. And she just took it. She did not lash out. She absorbed our culture's anxieties about women and about beauty and about class, and deflected them with humor and talent and joy.

That was *her* cross that she carried, and golly she carried it with grace and aplomb. Was it not Christ-like in her ability to take other people's pain and insecurities and judgement and both absorb and redirect them in a way that was always loving?

2) 2nd, I grew up with Whitney Houston's version of "I Will Always Love You." Same words, but really a different song.

Now, at this concert, and maybe this is sacrilege to say, Dolly really could not *sing* it live. She kind of spoke it.

And, again, the production of the concert kept messing up so she had to do it a bunch of times.

And since it was the #1 Country Music Love Song of All Time, and thus at the end, the crowd was getting restless at this point. But Dolly brought us all back home.

And after the 4th time of having to sing, really say, this song. She just started talking, and she talked about how people sometimes asked her if she were mad at Whitney Houston "for taking *her* song" and Dolly said something like "Whitney did not *take* my song, she *made* it her own.

In fact, I like her version BETTER than mine."

What is this self-giving, unconditional love?

That is willing to give up anything for truth and for beauty?

SHIFT

At the same time, Dolly was no shrinking violet.

Do not confuse this sermon with trying to say:

"We should be really nice to one another."

We *should*, but Jesus, in our passage today, does not seem that interested in **nice**.

"Get behind me Satan" will never be the title of a chart-topping hit, but it's not *incompatible* with "I will always love you."

Dolly could be tough; she told none other than Elvis Presley "No" when Elvis wanted to cover her song but take ½ of the proceeds from the arrangement. Dolly apparently cried all night after saying no to Elvis, but then later admitted: "After Whitney covered it though, I made enough money to buy Graceland"!

"Truth in love"—that's what Jesus does for Peter in our Gospel and what Dolly did for the world. The word "judgement" has a bad connotation these days, and for good reason; but all Jesus does in our story is take a look at Peter and what *he* is

saying and *judges* it to be wrong, and then has the courage and love for his friend to do so.

CONCLUSION

We keep listening to “I will always love you” in our house, different versions, and, like any good piece of Scripture, you start to hear different things from it, different emphases and aspects of the song.

It’s a strange “love song.”

She originally wrote it, of course, about her professional breakup with fellow country star Porter Wagoner. Porter Wagoner was ½ of this country music duo with Dolly, and had about ½ of the talent and so Dolly had to forge out on her own but wrote this incomparable song to say how she felt about him in the process.

Does it sound a little like what Jesus might be saying,

absent the sequins and hair-spray and Southern accent, about the disciples?
“You guys, Gosh, you keep getting wrong, don’t you understand what I am trying to say, it’s not all about you and glory and this world... This is going end badly for all of us. I am going to leave you, I am going to die and things are going to get worse: BUT know this: *I Will Always Love You*.

Is that not what is exactly underneath this Passion Prediction today, and Jesus’ harsh demands for discipleship?

Consider earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus talks about the costs, about leaving your family, and the disciples needing to say goodbye to your father and your mother and your sister and your brother.

What is underneath that? Nothing BUT *I will always love you*.

Is that not what God is always saying to us as he challenges us?

As he asks of us to give everything for him,
to take up our cross,
to live our lives for him,
to die for him?

Underneath it is always: whether it’s the lilting, breathier version of Dolly’s, or the soaring power ballad of Whitney Houston.

I will always love you

I will always love you.

AMEN