

15<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, Proper 19B  
Isaiah 50:4-9a  
an Church  
Psalm 116:1-9  
James 3:1-12  
Mark 8:27-38

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It's one thing to appreciate Christ, and it's another thing to give your life to Christ.

This summer I read an intriguing and humorous book called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (Simon & Schuster, 2007). A.J. Jacobs is Jewish by heritage, but he's never been at all religious. But for this one year, he decided to try to follow all the laws and rules found in the Bible, and see what happened.

I have to say he did a thorough job. He consulted with rabbis, priests, and ministers. He read theology. And he changed his lifestyle to practice the specific directions he found in scripture, with a few crazy and humorous incidents along the way. He grew his beard out long and full like the Hasidic Jews do. He dressed all in white, based on an obscure passage in Ecclesiastes. He ate only kosher food. He tithed 10% of his income to charity. He volunteered at a soup kitchen to serve the poor. He and his wife even obeyed the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply," conceiving and giving birth to twins that year!

He found that some Biblical commandments were especially hard to keep. It was downright painful for a New York workaholic to set apart every Sabbath as a day of rest. And it was hard for him to stop telling lies, which he realized he did many times each day in the course of ordinary conversation. He also worked hard on trying not to gossip or use sarcastic humor at the expense of others.

Over the course of time, A.J. discovered that following the Bible's commandments changed him. Swearing off curse words helped him become less angry. Praying three times a day gave him a sense of peace. He truly got hooked on the practice of gratitude, giving thanks for every good thing he experienced. And he found he became more compassionate.

In fact, A.J. was glad for the way following the Bible helped to make him a better person. He valued the self-help dimension of religion-- which is a pretty big change of heart for someone who'd been secular and suspicious of religion his whole life. But at the same time, he realized religion isn't just about improving yourself. It is fundamentally about relating to God. And that's one place he wasn't ready to go.

By the end of the year, A.J.'s feelings toward God were still uncertain and changeable. Many times he didn't believe in God at all, same as always. Sometimes, though, he began to feel a special reverence for life, a sense of holiness that was new to him. And there were rare times when he began to feel the faint stirrings of belief – the faint awareness of “a God who cares, who pays attention to [his] life, who loves.” Which he said was a beautiful thing.

So it turns out this crazy project opened a door for A.J.-- but at least by the end of the book, he couldn't yet cross over into something more – something we would call faith or belief or commitment. He could surrender part of his bank account to help others, but he wasn't able to surrender his spirit to the living God.

I wonder if that's something like where the disciples were in our scripture reading for today.

They'd been following Jesus for quite some time, and they had tried to go wherever Jesus led them, follow his commandments as it were. But now Jesus challenged them to something more – to surrender their lives, give over their very selves to him.

*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. (Mk 8:34-35)*

I never hear this passage without feeling a deep sense of personal challenge. Because Jesus is calling for exactly the kind of commitment and surrender that A.J. and a lot of us have trouble with. He is calling all of us disciples not just to imitate him, to become better people, but to completely throw our lot in with his. To give ourselves over to belong to Christ and follow Christ, even into dangerous places, in a way of life that calls for trust and sacrifice.

As I said before, it's one thing to appreciate Christ, and it's another thing to give your life to Christ.

I know a man who says, “When I truly open myself up to this, I'm scared to death to really follow Jesus and ask what he wants of me.” Because surrendering to Jesus will clearly cost us.

But I'm not convinced we are meant to receive this in a fearful way. Rather than being intimidated, let's think about what it can mean for our pattern of living – to be willing to “take up our cross” or “lose our life for Jesus' sake.”

To “take up our cross” recalls how the Romans forced prisoners to carry their crosses to the place where they would be crucified. Think of the resolute determination they needed to keep lugging those heavy beams as death loomed near.

To “lose our life” might bring to mind a more modern image, from September 11. The passengers on Flight 93 who confronted the hijackers and forced that plane down in Pennsylvania. The firefighters who just kept climbing into those burning twin towers. They didn’t set out to do it that morning, but when the time came they were willing to give away their lives for others.

Could Christ be calling us to literally give our lives in serving him? Well, it could be. We don’t know. We pray we’ll be ready if and when the time comes.

But it may be too simple to overdramatize what Jesus says. What if the sacrifice and surrender Jesus has in mind is not a one-time event, but an ongoing way of life? What if “taking up your cross” is something we do again and again, as we persevere in carrying the burdens of our lives and lightening the burdens of others? What if “losing our life” is something that happens repeatedly as we give our life energies to others through a thousand small actions every day?

The earliest Christians recognized it as a simple fact of life: You can hoard your life or you can give it away. There’s a choice to be made. You can live for yourself or you can live for God and others. You decide, not just once but many times through the priorities you practice throughout your life.

As people of faith, we believe that the reason God gave us life is so that we can give life away. This goes against so much of what our culture teaches. The culture tells us to maximize our power and influence. It says life is all about me, and how I can get ahead. But because we belong to Christ, we operate by different assumptions.

Our assumption is, in fact: *“Those who want to save their life will lose it. Those who lose their life for Christ’s sake will save it.”* Living for yourself is a dead end. Living for God is abundance. Living by greed will rob you of all vitality. Living generously will multiply your joy.

An orthodox Jew that A.J. Jacobs met said it this way – “It’s a different way of looking at the world. Your life isn’t about rights. It’s about responsibilities.” (Mr. Berkowitz, p. 251) You don’t go around thinking, how do I get what I’m entitled to? Instead, you ask, what can I give?

A friend made an observation that helped me a lot. I've often seen these sayings as something daunting and difficult. Something I could never live up to. *"Take up your cross... Lose your life."* But, she said, it's not as if we were called to live this perfectly. As if we could craft our lives into some kind of perfect sacrifice and then present it to God and say, "Look, what I did! Be proud of me!" That is not expected of us. God has already paid the price. We aren't saved through our works but through God's forgiveness.

No, instead, the sacrifices we make will be imperfect ones. We will live God's commands sometimes well and sometimes badly. We try to stop telling lies but a few slip through. We try to honor our father and mother, but sometimes lose our tempers. We do catch ourselves laughing at the expense of others.

And yet, in spite of all our limits and failings, God is at work in us. God is growing a new life in us. God is making us a new creation, for the sake of God's whole beloved Creation. And God will keep working in us and through us, to help us release our grip on our lives, so that we will finally save them – for God's good and loving purposes.

Did you hear about Solomon Jackson, Jr.? He's the man who won the \$260 million lottery in South Carolina last month. He's a regular guy, a retired state employee. And what will he do with all those riches? All he would say was, "I'm already retired, I've already got a good income, God has blessed me, so I won't do a bunch with it." Then he smiled and added, "But somebody's going to be blessed."

Well, it sounds to me like Solomon Jackson, Jr. is thinking about giving it away! It sounds to me like he's a person who understands that the reason we are put on this earth, is so that we can give our lives away. And I hope he'll be able to live that out.

Just like I hope we will. Because here you and I are, with riches galore. We are drenched in God's love, surrounded by forgiveness and goodness we did not earn. Here we are, rich and wealthy and blessed children of God, with so much to give away. And somebody is going to be blessed. Amen.