

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19b  
Isaiah 50:4-9a  
James 3:1-12  
Mark 8:27-38

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In the video a middle-aged couple sits on their modest patio, describing their financial plan. They've built up a sizable nest egg, and now they're making plans to be sure all that money will be gone before they die. They don't believe their children would be well-served by a hefty inheritance. Instead, they're planning to progressively give their estate away to a number of different ministries and organizations they believe in. As they describe their careful planning, you can't mistake the sense of deep contentment and joy that radiates out from them.

What's going on here? These are regular folks, like anybody you'd see around Portland, but this plan of theirs is completely radical! It completely contradicts America's cultural values. Our culture tells us to get what we can while we can, build our empires, and above all guard our own interests and security. It's one thing for Bill & Melinda Gates to give away millions, but for regular people it seems, what... reckless? even dangerous? But this couple is intentionally choosing a different path to fulfill their life calling. In order to win their life, they are *letting loose of it*. Instead of guarding, they are *investing* in something beyond themselves.

It resonates perfectly well with what Jesus says today:

*"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 the sake of the gospel, will save it."*

This teaching stands at the exact center of Mark's gospel – and at the very center of our Christian life, too. But no matter how often we hear it, it never fails to challenge.

For the disciples it marks a turning point. For perhaps two years they watched Jesus welcoming outlaws, breaking sabbath rules, tangling with demons, even touching a man with leprosy. Maybe they should have realized that Jesus' radical way would carry a cost. But they only saw the beauty of God's revolutionary love breaking in, leaping over boundaries of hate, bringing new life to people who never imagined they'd ever be included. They saw *divine glory* alive in Jesus. In fact, Peter was so awake to this glory, he was able to name Jesus as "Messiah!" I always picture Peter staggering back in shock as the words burst out from him—there's a truth alive in the air now! That truth triggers more shocking words from Jesus.

"Take up your cross and follow" is a stark warning. Following Jesus is risky and dangerous. There's a price to be paid when you sign on with a world-changing God. When you act out divine values of loving the stranger or serving the poor, you'd better expect opposition from those invested in human values, the powers that be. Those powers crucified Jesus and have killed many sisters and brothers for challenging injustice in his name. Even in peaceful times, there's always an element of sacrifice when we follow Christ's cross-marked path.

The second shocking statement sounds like nonsense at first: “Lose your life for my sake and the gospel, and you will save it.” But when you live with this teaching, you realize it is *pure genius*. Because, as people of faith, we believe this is *exactly* what we’re created and meant to do. We believe the reason God gave us life is precisely so that we can *give life away*, because it is in giving that we receive.

This is not what we normally see operating in the world around us, of course. If there’s anything to appreciate about the tumultuous times we’re living through right now, it’s that we always have before us the stark example of what life ends up looking like when self-promotion and personal profit are placed ahead of everything else. It looks like rampant ego, and it becomes a kind of illness. This may be the logical extension of our culture’s adoration for wealth, power, status and general self-centered living—but it is not the way to the life that truly is life.

Because we belong to Christ, we operate by different assumptions. Our assumption is that living for yourself is a dead end, but living for God is abundance. Living by greed will rob you of all vitality, but living generously will multiply your joy.

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. And we make this choice, not just once but many times through the priorities we practice throughout life.

I’ve been reflecting on that phrase “losing your life” and asking what it really means. When Jesus speaks of losing your life, it’s not about getting lost or being abandoned... It’s not about your ego or life force disappearing or being negated... It’s not necessarily about facing death (though that’s not out of the question). Rather, I believe “losing your life” is about *letting loose* of our frantic grip on existence. It’s about *releasing our lives* into God’s kingdom and influence.

We practice this *letting loose* or *releasing* in many ways. In our life of prayer, it is an essential movement. There are those times when we may be so tied up in a struggle – like trying to be a good parent, or taking care of someone who’s sick, or completing a stressful project at work-- we may be so frantically clutching, frantically engaged in our human responsibilities and choices and strivings and fears, that we forget all about the call to faithfully “let go” and allow God to influence us. If we can prayerfully and worshipfully let loose for just a moment of our human strivings... “lose our life” into God’s hands... this may give God’s Spirit the room to work in us... to refresh our thinking, lend us wisdom, let love enter into a stressful place, renew our courage to press on. Following Christ over a lifetime means “losing our life” again and again this way. Remembering our life is not our own. God loves us and wants to help.

There’s another meaning I’m reflecting on. I’m thinking of how we sometimes “lose ourselves” in a beautiful piece of music, or a wonderful book, or “lose ourselves” in an activity we love like running or hiking or gardening. How we give ourselves over to this positive experience, so that it carries us away. It could be that “losing our life” to Christ and to God’s good news is something like

that. Being powerfully carried away by the beauty of God's love and justice, by the necessity of Christ's compassion, by God's radical vision of a world repaired and humanity healed. "Losing our life" is being swept up so profoundly into God's kingdom and reign that our attitudes and actions are shaped by God's values. We take on the very qualities we so admire, qualities of compassion and justice, forgiveness and reconciliation, generosity and service, contentment and joy. We lose our lives into God's kingdom and reign, and we discover who we are meant to be.

"Losing our life" can also mean what we saw in that couple who were planning their "give it all away" retirement. They weren't just releasing personal control of their resources – they were *investing* those possessions in keeping with their deepest-held values. And I believe that's at the heart of what Jesus is calling each of us to do. Not only to *release* but to *invest* what we have and who we are – to *spend* our energy, our talents, our time, in keeping with God's love. Jesus is calling us to *spend ourselves* for what matters to God. Peacemaking, justice, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, mercy -- the radical love God has for this earth and all its creatures. "Losing our life" is something that happens again and again, as we faithfully *invest* our life energies, through a thousand small actions every day. It's the only life that is really worth having.

*Take up your cross and follow me... Lose your life for my sake and the gospel, and you will save it.*

There's a good reason this passage stands right at the center of Mark's gospel. It is the pivot point for everything else. It shows who Jesus is – the one who dies and rises for all. It shows who the church is – communities united around the world, spending their energy so the world can experience Christ's love. It even tells us who we are – created to share, to give, to invest in God's purpose. That's the great and wonderful mystery that stands at the heart of Jesus' life, and the heart of our lives too.

When I think of who Jesus is for me, I think of a spiritual home, a place of peace and trust. Jesus makes it possible for me to dwell in God's love, to settle my restless heart, to find strength and hope. But Jesus is more than that. Jesus is also a challenger. He gives me a vision to live for, a meaning and purpose for my life energy, and the courage to go there. Jesus is always prodding me to make my outer actions match up with my inner life of faith. Since I belong to Jesus, what does that mean for my day-to-day activities, how I devote my time, my effort, my attention?

Along this line, I want to leave you with something to pray and reflect with this week. I invite you to reflect on who Jesus is for *you* – and how Jesus is calling you to *invest your life* these days. Or, it could be to *re-invest yourself*, your energies and time and love in a commitment that is already essential to you and reflects the character of Christ. Where do you see God calling you to *spend yourself*, in keeping with who Jesus is?

We'll give the Spirit some room to work with us on that. May God bless us all on this cross-carrying, life-losing, life-finding path, and may it bear good fruit for God's needful world. Amen.