

Sermon -- 11th Sunday after Pentecost, August 28, Matt 16:21-28; The Rev. Mary S. Trainor

Jesus says, “*those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*”

There we were, it seemed like for hours, searching in drawer after drawer for the lost item. Last weekend, I was down in Milwaukee with my elderly mother. I was there to take her to a big family event and to her old church. She wanted to get dressed up, and wanted to wear a particular scarf that matched her chosen outfit. And, she had to have THAT scarf. We finally did find that scarf – but it became unimportant along the way, for in the scarf hunt we encountered two treasures. You see, she opened lots of boxes and in one she found two small, beautifully handmade antique lace ladies handkerchiefs. These were made for a bride to hold. She told me their history: they had been given to her by her mother, who had received them from her grandmother who had lived in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I had never seen them! Well, it just so happens that not one but two of my children are getting married next summer, and they both so appreciate tradition. You know that old saying that the bride is to have “**something old something new something borrowed something blue**” for the wedding – and here were two “**something olds**” for my mother to give to two grandchildren. We wrapped up those precious two antiques, and my mother had a special time giving to them both. Bottom line: in the process of trying to find something that had been lost, something priceless was found. Our Gospel today is about losing and finding. **Jesus says, “*those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*”**

We do search for lost things in life, but that is not all we search for – we search for ourselves! You’ve heard people say, “**I’m trying to find myself**” haven’t you? We search for filling the emptiness inside us, we search for lives that are more fulfilling. Many people try to fill this emptiness with all kinds of things like jobs, cars, sports, friends, food, shopping, drugs, alcohol, power, and money. Yet, that void remains. The void is God shaped – nothing else but God can fill it. **Jesus says, “*those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*”**

The Gospel begins today with Jesus teaching His disciples. This is an intimate time between Jesus and the disciples, away from the crowds – and we enter mid-story. Right before today’s Gospel, Peter has recognized Jesus as the Messiah. And then Jesus announces that it is upon the faith of these apostles that the church will be built. A big time of rejoicing for them; a mountaintop experience! But now Jesus knows that it is important to prepare them for what to expect in the days to come. It is in this context of rejoicing that Jesus, the Messiah as well as a healthy young man in his prime, tells them for the 1st time that soon He will **suffer and be killed**. We can only imagine the shock that this announcement had on the apostles! The mountaintop experience was replaced with a deep valley experience. Peter replied to this bad news with denial, by saying: “**God forbid, Lord. This must not happen to you!**” We need not make fun of Peter here, as he must have had no clue what Jesus was talking about. Peter loved Jesus so much and did not want Him to go away, much less suffer and die. Peter just would not accept it!

Jesus uses this as a teaching moment. He says to Peter, “**Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me.**” What is Jesus saying here? Peter obviously was not the devil. But, Peter had just said things that could have been words of the devil tailored just to Jesus. You see, the word Satan means “tempter,” they are one and the same. Jesus saw Peter as the tempter, because He came with a mission: to save us, and it would require His death to do it. Jesus was human as well as divine, and as a human He sure did not want to go through the suffering that was just ahead – but He knew it was absolutely essential. Oh yes, wouldn’t the great tempter have loved it if Jesus had just given up at this point? Jesus could not let Peter or anyone get in the way of His mission of redemption.

Jesus continues by saying, “**you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.**” Jesus is teaching us priorities here – and saying to put God first. Jesus further helps Peter, and us, understand by teaching about denying ourselves and following Him and that, “***those who lose their life***

for my sake will find it.” But, what does Jesus mean here when he says “lose?” Does that mean we need to lose our identities as people, or become martyrs or punish ourselves? No. Jesus means that we are to put things of the world second and cling to Him as THE answer to finding ourselves through Him.

But wait just a minute, how do we set our minds only on divine things in the year 2011 in Shawano, Wisconsin? Our culture, the media, TV, internet, billboards, magazines, all bombard us 24/7 with human things; people telling us what to think, what to do, especially if it involves spending or acquiring more money. Why, how often in the grocery store have you been reminded of Jesus by Christian music or photos in magazines of Mother Theresa at the check out stand? Not. In the face of this media onslaught, how do we keep our focus on Jesus? We keep our focus on Jesus by making an effort...and that effort is what the church calls “spiritual disciplines.” This is not about earning our way to heaven. We do not earn our salvation, for we are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2: 8-9). But it does take intentionality to live our lives for Christ’s sake.

Spiritual disciplines are ways in which we come before God to grow. Spiritual disciplines include bible reading, prayer, acts of service, worship, meditation, celebration, contemplation, gratitude, fasting, etc. We can do even simple things like putting a cross near our computer screen to remind us of God’s presence, or writing a bible verse on a sticky note where we see it on the dashboard of our car. The task for us is to cultivate our daily lives into fertile ground in which God can bring growth and change; the spiritual disciplines help us do this. When we set our minds on divine things, when we put God first in our lives, when we give up control to God, when we are not distracted or focused on human things -- then we will experience that freedom in Christ, then we will find ourselves once and for all. And as we love God we will love His people. You lose your life, not by physically dying - though it could include that - but by making your pleasures, your ego, your recognition, your wealth secondary to loving God. So yes, there is a cost to following Jesus, it takes effort, sometimes it is difficult, but oh my—it is so worth it.

Theologian Tom Long said, **"A life that is spent soothing the pain of the sick, caring for children in need, hammering nails in houses for those without shelter, sharing bread with the hungry, visiting those in prison, and denying oneself may seem like a squandered life in the economy of a self-centered age, but in the storehouse of heaven, it is a lavish treasure."**

Finding his true life, this treasure, was a process for Peter, and it is a process for us; it takes time. Peter eventually did understand what Jesus was teaching here, and went on to live a long life of serving God and building up His church. Peter finally surrendered his will to Christ, and found the freedom that only Christ can give. Peter said in his 1st letter (Peter 2: 24), ***“Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”***

Maybe today you, or a loved one, are searching for your life to be more fulfilling, or searching to fill an emptiness inside. If this is you, first, know how much God loves you. God wants you to find the treasure of your life. Open your hearts to God’s lavish love right now, and commit to regular spiritual practices such as times set aside for prayer, bible study, worship, and reaching out to those in need. If you do God will do the growth in you over time, and you don’t have to do this alone --- for upcoming here at St. John’s there are numerous activities and events that can help you with this process.

Let us pray: Lord, we present ourselves before you as we are, with our faults and problems, but we really love you. Help us to put you first, and find ourselves through our relationship with you, through spiritual disciplines. Help us to make more time for you and for service. Thank you for your redeeming love, and bless us here at St. John’s. In Jesus Holy Name we pray, Amen.