

our crucified and risen Savior

Matthew 16:21-26

March 19, 2017

*If any of you want to come with me,
you must forget yourself, carry your cross,
and follow me.
For if you want to save your own life,
you will lose it;
but if you lose your life for my sake,
you will find it.*

I have been fascinated, and daunted, by these words from Jesus for most of my life. One of the first sermons I ever preached, thirty-five or so years ago, was based on Luke's account of this same conversation. I have struggled with what Jesus means. What does it mean to "forget yourself?" What does it mean to "carry your cross?" And what is Jesus really saying when he says: "If you want to save your own life you will lose it, but if you lose it for my sake, you will find it?"

I struggle because I love my life and I don't want to lose it! And I struggle because what I want most for you, for all of you, are lives that are good and full and meaningful and fulfilling and joyful. That's why I am a minister. That's why I preach the gospel -- which is good news, after all! -- so that you will not lose or squander or disparage your lives, but that you will find life, life in all its fullness, by being found, by being grasped, by knowing that you are grasped, in the strong and relentless embrace of God's love.

So why does Jesus tell you to lose your life? Are we supposed to be martyrs? Literally? If I preached martyrdom every week, we'd clear out this sanctuary pretty quickly. So I am apt to look for some kind of metaphorical meaning, some kind of symbolic meaning, in these words, if I talk about them at all. And if I do talk about them, I'd likely tell you Jesus is merely speaking hyperbolically, parabolically, and I'd tell you what he "really means."

But I can't do that! I can't do my job, I can't live with myself, if I do not take Jesus seriously. And what good am I to you if I don't urge you to take Jesus seriously? And I have always thought that these words must be close, very close, to the heart of who Jesus is and what he is about. So if we are serious about being followers of Jesus, and not just playing at being Christians, we have to listen carefully when he says, "If you want to come with me ..."

If you want to come with me, you must forget yourself and carry your cross ...

Not: "If you want to come with me, you must be nice to everybody you meet."

Not: "If you want to come with me, you must show yourself worthy by acts of generosity and goodwill."

Not: "If you want to come with me, you must be an upstanding member of society, a law-abiding citizen, a person of high moral character."

No. "If you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me." Because "if you want to save your own life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it."

But what does that mean? It's so puzzling, so paradoxical, all upside down. Like so much of the gospel, all topsy-turvy and upside down! If you lose it, you will find it. The last will be first. The high and mighty will be brought down and the humble and lowly lifted up.

Why is the gospel all about turning the world upside down? Or maybe it's the world that is upside down, and maybe it's the world and all of us that need to be turned upside down in order to be right side up!

The gospel is paradoxical, provocative, non-conformist, critical and disruptive of the status quo. Which means that if we are comfortable with the way things are, if we fit in just fine, if our "gospel" is about making our lives and the lives of our neighbors a little better, we have the wrong gospel. We're on the wrong path.

But let's be clear. The gospel is about finding life, not rejecting it. That's the paradox. If you try to find it, if you try to save it, you will lose it. But if you lose it, you will find it.

If you lose your life, for my sake, you will find it.

For Jesus, that was literally true. He lost his life, for our sake. He forgot himself. He carried his cross. And he was hung on it.

He forgot himself. Do you think it was easier for him to do that, to forget himself, to deny himself? He was a human being, like us, one of us, the man of Nazareth! Were his hopes and dreams any less than ours? Was his life any less precious than ours?

I think it was harder, not easier, for him to forget himself, because he had more to forget. The urge, the temptation, was real, to find another way, to take another way, to fulfill God's purpose some other way. On the night itself of his arrest, he was still praying: "My Father! All things are possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want."

"Not what I want, but what you want." He forgot himself. He carried his cross. And he was hung on it. He was crucified. "Our crucified and risen Savior." It's one phrase, one indivisible phrase. You lose life to find it. He did. He lost his life, for our sake, and because he did, because he was crucified, he found life, for himself and for us. He is our Savior.

This is the way, this is the way to life, through the cross. Look at our Lenten banner. The cross is “on” the way, “in” the way, but the cross is not the destination! The path leads through the cross, beyond the cross, to life.

You die to live. You lose your life to find it. That’s the meaning of baptism: you die to live. You lose life as it is, life as it was. It dies, so that you may be re-born.

What dies? The life all about “me” dies. The life in which I am my own god, my own savior, dies. The life lived for “my” sake dies. Jesus said: “If you lose your life, for my sake, you will find it.” For my sake. For Jesus’ sake. For him. What would your life be like, what is your life like, when you live it for him? When you say: “Not what I want, but what you want.”

That’s the way you go with Jesus. It is a way that leads through death, but it is not a way that ends in death. Everything in you that is already dead must die, so that the life God plants in you may live.

It is still paradoxical, still daunting. I am still struggling. And maybe, just maybe, I have come back to symbol, to metaphor, to a symbolic dying, a metaphorical dying. But I don’t think so. There is something in us -- the fierce pride that demands to make its own way, that sets its own rules, that will bow to no one, that will never give up its freedom to do what it wants to do -- that must die, or we will never live.

If you want to save your own life, you will lose it. But if you lose your life, if you let it go for Jesus’ sake, for Jesus’ sake, you will find it.

