

8.30.20                      Why You Need to Lose Your Life to Find It                      Matthew 16.21-28

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

How do you feel when you lose something? I was with a friend on Tuesday evening and we were about an hour from home and he couldn't find his car keys. He had a slightly panicked, concerned look on his face as he tried to remember where he could have put them or dropped them. Fortunately, after brief search he found them and was able to head home greatly relieved. I know when I can't find something, I can get frustrated at myself for not taking better care of whatever it is and for not being more organized. Often when I admit to another person that I can't find something, invariably I end up finding it or it turns up. I think my friend who lost his car keys and I are typical – most of us don't like losing things – whether it's keys, an important document, or a tool.

Most of the time we don't try **to lose something on purpose**. Yet in today's Gospel passage, that's what Jesus is telling his followers we need to do. We need to lose something, not by accident or because of carelessness, busyness, or disorganization, **but on purpose**. Not only are we to lose something on purpose, it's something very valuable and personal not merely something small like a key or inconvenient like a pair of glasses. **What Jesus says we need to lose on purpose is our life!** Why would he say that? What if he's right? What would that mean for you and for me? Let's start with the scripture and what Jesus says in **Matthew 16.21-28** which I'm going to read in three sections with some explanation in between.

“21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* 23 But he turned and said to Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

In Matthew's Gospel this is the first of three times that Jesus talks about what is called his Passion – which refers to all he will endure from being betrayed by one of his disciples and handed over to the authorities, who will condemn him to death and hand

him over to the Romans, who would publicly execute him on a cross which was a horrible way to die. But when it was all over, on the third day he would be raised. All three of these passion predictions are misunderstood by the disciples. Their lack of comprehension gives Jesus the opportunity **to teach them and us about what it means to follow him**. It can be easy to miss **in this first prediction of the passion that Jesus doesn't mention the cross when he speaks of what will happen to him**. He only says he will be handed over and be killed.

Upon hearing Jesus talk openly about what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem, Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* The language here is like that of a parent talking to a child who has misbehaved or of a superior correcting an inferior. Jesus looked at the other disciples and was concerned about their reaction to Peter's words, so he rebukes Peter in the strongest possible terms, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”* Jesus says this because it's a temptation of the Adversary to take a path that doesn't include self-denial, and suffering. Jesus says Peter's rejection of the path God has laid out is based on thinking about life from a human point of view rather than from God's perspective. **Jesus embodies and teaches a message of self-denial, service, and suffering.**

This is revealed in **Matthew 16:24-26**, *“24 Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them **deny themselves** and take up their cross and follow me. 25 **For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.** 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?’”*

**Being a disciple of Christ means being willing to deny ourselves and to lose our life for Christ's sake to find deeper, truer, more meaningful, eternal life.** Denying ourselves is not something that's advocated a lot in our culture. There seem to be more fans of self-indulgence than self-denial. How many ads can you think of that feature self-denial? This can be as true inside the church as outside the church. **What are some ways you practice self-denial? Can you identify one or two ways?**

**One of the things that strikes me the most about this passage is Jesus warning us we can lose our life before we die.** Many people lose or squander their lives on things that are of little or no eternal consequence. It's not enjoyable to lose something whether keys or more valuable things like a purse or wallet. The more valuable something is, like **time**, the more it hurts to lose it. Nothing is more valuable than one's life. These words of Jesus are a challenge to us all to be ready to face even our death and still stay true to Christ.

The final piece of today's Gospel is Matthew 16:27-28, *"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."*

**The paradox Jesus teaches is the way to self-fulfillment is not self-indulgence, but self-denial.** Protestant Reformation leader John Calvin (1509-1564) understood losing our life for Christ's sake and wrote with a repeated emphasis on the phrases "We are not our own, we are God's."

**"We are not our own;** therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations and actions.

**We are not our own;** therefore let us not propose it as our end, to seek what may be expedient for us according to the flesh.

**We are not our own;** therefore let us, as far as possible, forget ourselves and all things that are ours. On the contrary, **we are God's;** to him, therefore, **let us live and die.**

**We are God's;** therefore let his wisdom and will preside in all our actions.

**We are God's;** towards him, therefore, as our only legitimate end, **let every part of our lives be directed.** (Institutes III, 7.)

We are not our own, we are God's. Leave self behind, deny self – these words are straightforward and clear... and difficult for us to hear, accept, and live. Who wants to deny himself or herself anything? There are so many things we do not want to be denied, on the contrary, we want "it" when we want it and are upset when we can't have

it. What “it” is - changes from moment to moment and from one encounter to the next. This is true at every level of life from our physical needs and desires to our emotional longings even to our spiritual lives.

How ironic is it that one of the things that Christians get most upset about is when they are denied something they want? Do we followers of Jesus see being denied something we want in any aspect of our life, as a moment to practice leaving self behind or the reason to push a little harder, lobby a little longer, argue a little more pointedly, express a tad more self-pity, list a few more reasons why things going our way is probably best. Jesus is not encouraging us to be doormats, but he is saying if we want to follow him, we need to leave the path of self-gratification, self-exaltation, and self-promotion behind in losing ourselves in obeying God’s will. **One of the trickiest spiritual traps of all is insisting that we are not insisting on *our way*, we are insisting on *God’s way* that we are clearly and definitively right about.**

The New Testament states Jesus humbled himself and was obedient to God’s will even to the point of death on the cross. The Apostle Paul understood this and wrote to the **Galatians (2:19b-20)**, *“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* Paul understood he needed to lose his life, he needed to give up his will, and allow himself to die with Christ, which takes humility, so that Christ might live in him and guide his life. St. Benedict the founder of the Benedictine movement wrote in his famous Rule, ***“The second step of humility is reached when a man, not loving his own will, does not bother to please himself but follows the injunction of the Lord (John 6:38): ‘I came not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.’”***

Nobody knows what following Jesus will entail when we say, “yes” to Jesus’ invitation. Many people like to wear crosses, bearing the cross is a bit different. Wearing a cross, keeping one in your pocket, can be a helpful reminder of what Jesus is saying – his followers are to take up the instrument of their own destruction - and to follow him. German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) grasped what Jesus was saying in these verses and that’s why he wrote in his book *The Cost of*

Discipleship, ***“When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die.”*** Our true self is found not in self-preservation, but self-giving and self-sacrifice. This is one of the great truths of the Christian life.

Self-denial is not part of our culture’s image of the good life. Self-denial is not self-loathing or self-hate. Self-denial is not just about giving up things. What Jesus is talking about is an orientation to our life that is not focused on self at all – not self-fulfillment, self-esteem, or even self-emptying. Rather Jesus’ call to discipleship is based on faith in Christ and the vindication of God.

Jesus asks for total commitment from his followers. Total commitment facilitates success. Dying to self, losing our life, leads to living for Jesus and finding our true destiny as a daughter or son of God. Denying our self means enabling God to live through us and love through us. This leads to a better life than we can create on our own. John Wesley (1703-1791) who was an 18<sup>th</sup> century pastor, theologian and evangelist and the leader of a revival movement within the Church of England known as Methodism was asked what religion he preached and what it was good for. His answer is an example of why we want to lose our life to find it in Christ. He replied: *“I do preach to as many as desire to hear, every night and morning. You ask, what I would do with them: I would make them virtuous and happy, easy in themselves, and useful to others. Whither would I lead them? To heaven; to God the Judge, the Lover of all, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant. What religion do I preach? The religion of love; the law of kindness brought to light by the gospel. What is this good for? To make all who receive it enjoy God and themselves: to make them feel like God; lovers of all; contented in their lives; and crying out at their death in calm assurance, “O grave, where is thy victory! Thanks be unto God, who giveth me the victory, through my Lord Jesus Christ.”*

**Losing our self-centered life to follow Jesus on a cross-centered, Christ-centered life requires humbly submitting to and depending upon God which opens us up to a greater life than we can imagine or achieve on our own.**

As Christians we are to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus in our time and place. Choosing to be a disciple on Jesus' terms is something we all must decide for ourselves. The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) wrote,

***“The right path in life is very narrow, but it is important to find it.***

***You can understand it, as well as we can understand it,***

***as a walkway of wood built across a swamp; if you step off it,***

***you will plunge into a swamp of misunderstanding and evil.***

***A wise man returns to the true path at once,***

***but a weak man plunges further and further into the swamp,***

***and it becomes more and more difficult for him to get out.”***

The walkway of wood built across the swamp of life is the way of the cross, and it is one we all choose whether we will follow or not.

Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, presents part of today's Gospel this way: “Then Jesus went to work on his disciples. *“Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. **Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself?**”*

The spiritual paradox of following Jesus is we need to lose our life so that we may find it in Christ.

**Blessing:** “Believer, claim in faith the death and the life of Jesus as yours. Enter, in His grave, into the rest from self and its work – the rest of God. With Christ, who committed His spirit into the Father's hands, **humble yourself and descend each day into that perfect, helpless dependence upon God. God will raise you up and exalt you.** Every morning, sink, in deep, deep nothingness into the grave of Jesus. **Every day, the life of Jesus will be manifest in you.**

Andrew Murray (1828-1917), South African Pastor and Writer

**Questions for Discussion or Reflection:**

1. Why do you think Peter began to rebuke Jesus when he spoke of undergoing great suffering, rejection, and being killed?
2. Why do you think Jesus rebuked Peter and responded so strongly? What do you think Jesus means when he says to Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*
3. How can we or do we set our mind on human things rather than divine things?
4. What are some ways you practice self-denial?
5. What does this saying of Jesus mean to you: *“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.”* Does this statement shape your life in anyway?
6. A question for personal reflection: How can I trust God more? How can I surrender more?

Point to Ponder: Discipleship is the active taking up of what could be avoided for the sake of Jesus and the gospel.