

"Lose Your Life"

Scripture Passages: 1) **Romans 12:9-21**
2) **Exodus 3:1-15**
3) **Matthew 16:21-28**

Call: Moses' call was to provide the needed leadership to move the Israelites from a place of bondage and slavery, to a place of freedom and joy. How was Moses to go about such a task? Moses was to tell the people to follow God, to follow Yahweh, to follow the Great I Am.

As we all know, Jesus' call led to the cross. In our text from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus begins to teach his disciples about this call that would lead to the cross. But he doesn't only talk about his own call. He also talks about the call of everyone who chooses to follow him. Listen as Jesus instructs his disciples about the life of discipleship, the life of following Jesus.

Read Matthew 16:21-28

Get Behind Me Satan: "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 will find it."

The theological point that Jesus makes here is the crux of the Gospel message. To know life we must die. That is the truth of the cross. For resurrection to take place, death must be experienced. As followers of Jesus we spend our lives grappling with this truth and often we find ourselves expressing and living just as Peter did here. Peter said, "God forbid it. Lord! This must never happen to you."

Every culture in every time seeks to undermine and train its inhabitants to resist, ignore, or fight against this powerful truth. Jesus had to tell 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."

What are the contributing factors in our similar behavior? What are all the different voices that try to get us to ignore the truth that we must lose our life to gain life? The voices are many. They come from inside us and outside us. They come from our upbringing. They come from our culture. They pick at us from every front. We too must continually be saying, "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." As followers of Jesus we are to set our minds on divine things, not on human things. We want to focus our lives on the issues that matter to God, not the issues that matter to Tom.

Letting Samuel Go: Tuesday was a day of dying or losing life at our house. Deb took Samuel to Grand Rapids and stuck him on a plane as he headed back to college. I will not see him until Christmas. It is hard to say goodbye, to let him go. What if we didn't? What if we did not let him head off to school because it is just too hard for us as parents?

One of the astounding aspects to our time in Spain was being almost completely dependent on Samuel. He ordered our food, got us from place to place, found bathrooms when we needed them, made everything work at the grocery store. For five days we drove around in a rental car and Samuel was the co-pilot reading all the signs, since I could not. It was both humbling and incredibly cool to be dependent on my kid to take care of me. If Deb and I chose not to let go of Samuel, none of what we experienced in Spain would have happened. We must lose our lives in order to gain life. Deb and I have to die to our desire to hold on to our kids, so that they can

grow and mature into the beautiful people God has made them to be. Losing our lives, leads to life, that is the truth of the Gospel.

The Decline of the Church: So how might that truth translate into our life together here at the church?

I have talked about Phyllis Tickle's book The Great Emergence. In her book Tickle makes the case that every 500 years the church goes through a time of tremendous change. During the moment of that change two key events happen. First, the churches that have been in existence will either die off or go through a dramatic and significant shift in how they live out their lives. The second thing that happens is a birthing takes place. So for instance, 500 years ago the protestant church was birthed, including us the Presbyterian branch. Now 500 years later all kinds of churches are being birthed while we are the existing church that will either die or be resurrected in a new way.

Those of us in the existing church must decide. Will we simply be cut off from the vine or will we choose to go through a pruning process, staying on the vine, and becoming healthier? Will we lose our life so that we gain life? Or will we hang on to what we know and simply die off?

As you know the Presbyterian denomination has gone from a membership of 4 million to less than 2 million in the last 45 years. The denomination continues to lose around 20,000 members a year. Our congregation has gone from 500 to 250 members during that same time period. Last year was the first year in 45 years that the congregation experienced significant growth. We were one of about 10 congregations in the 70 congregations of this Presbytery that grew last year. This year, however, we will be fortunate if we add enough members to outpace the number of deaths. Most likely 2011 will be another year of decline. If we continue to decline by about 6 people per year, in 20 years the membership will be about 130 with 50 to 65 people in worship. That equates to not having a full time pastor with extremely limited ministry and mission. In 40 years, perhaps with-in my life-time this congregation would no longer exist.

Those of us in this room over 60 might be able to live out our lives, with this church in existence, while not making significant changes to how we live out our life together. For those of us under 60 this church will have died before our time to enter our eternal home, if we do not find ways to faithfully lead people into a relationship with the saving work of God. The reality, 90% or more of mainline churches are in this exact same situation. Talk to the people at St. Marks. Talk to the people at the Methodist church. Churches that have been in existence for a while are struggling. That does not mean that Christ's church is struggling. We have 5 new church developments in and around Paw Paw. They are all doing well. But the mainline churches are not. Are we willing to ask why?

I came back from vacation to find us struggling as a congregation with the same struggles we have been discussing for the last nine years. Why is that? Why is it so hard to embrace our reality? Will we lose our life so that we can gain life? Or will we simply choose death?

We have to choose as a whole congregation, not just me as the pastor, or those of us on staff, or not just a handful of people, not just the leadership, all of us must choose. Do we believe the core message of the Gospel that Jesus preaches here? Do we believe that we must lose our life to gain life?

In an interview, Dr. William Pannell, a preaching professor at Fuller Theological Seminary was asked the question, "What keeps us who follow Jesus from being a mirror of the kingdom?" He responded, "In the church today, we're always looking for comfort. People want to join a church where they're comfortable, or they want to hear preaching that makes them feel good.

That's not what the kingdom is about. If that's what you want, go to the country club."

Next he was asked, "In contrast to this search for comfort, how is Jesus' justice work radical?" He responded, "As humans we are fundamentally self-centered. Jesus comes into history and says that if we're going to follow him, we have to give up all rights to ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow him. To an American society that is deeply committed to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Jesus says that true life and true liberty and true happiness is a result of allowing God to be God in our lives. If we want to live, we must die."

As a congregation will we lose our life in order to gain life?

God First: The elders and deacons have been studying a wonderful book, Unbinding the Gospel by Martha Grace Reese. The book discusses the mainline churches inability, or unwillingness to change so that it has the ability to reach out to our world. Reese says two things are critical in order to reach out to our world: Being Real, and Transformative Faith.

Those are the two primary traits that people outside the church are looking for. They are looking for a church where the people in that church are real: real in terms of life struggles and their journey with God. The second thing they are looking for is faith, belief that transforms. People come to churches because they know something is missing from their lives. They don't know what, but they believe they will recognize it when they see it. What Reese says they are looking for is faith that transforms the believer.

So more important than style of music, or type of program, or even pastoral leadership is the real faith of the people in the church. Is their relationship with God the most important aspect of their lives? Is their relationship with God transforming how they live? Is their relationship with God so exciting that they can't help but share their love of God with others? People outside the church are looking for communities who have lost their life, in order to gain life. People are starving for that. The church is called to be that, just as Moses was called, and Jesus was called. We too are called to lose our lives, so that life will bud and grow and bear fruit all around us.

Conversations: If you find yourselves having conversations that are filled with gossip, griping, complaining, whining, anything that does not build up this body of Christ, then stop immediately. If you hear such conversation among us, tell the speaker to quit. Instead turn the conversation to God. Ask how is God transforming our lives?

How have you lost your life, so that you gain life? That should be our focus as a congregation, and as a people.

Conclusion: God has called each and every one of us. We are called to lose our life, so that we gain life. Then we are to share that new life with the world.

We, along with every other mainline congregation are at a pivotal moment in history. Will we choose to keep going in the direction we are going, knowing that it will lead to being cut off the vine, or will we choose resurrection, will we choose to be pruned, dying to old ways of living so that we gain life? Pruning is painful. It hurts. It is filled with grief. But the results are beautiful.

My heart grieves with deep pain every time Samuel goes off, half-way across the world, but what a selfish choice to hold him back.

In a similar way we can choose to keep our congregational life as it is, if we choose that many in this room will see the end of their lives before the end of this congregation. But if we choose that route, this congregation will not be around to serve future generations. It will be pruned from the vine, just as so many congregations are being pruned from the vine as we speak. Isn't that just as selfish a choice as Deb and I holding Samuel back?

Will we lose our lives, so that we gain life? Christ gave his life, so that we might have life.

To follow Christ is to choose that same path, so that others will also gain life. Are we on the path to life or some other? Amen.