

4th Sunday of Pentecost **“Losing Your Life for Jesus”** June 28 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. The word Jesus uses for “find” in Greek is a form of Eureka (*heuriskō*)! That is what Archimedes shouted when he had discovered the principle of volume. The word for “losing life” (*apollymi*) implies an absolute destruction. This is not losing your keys in the couch only to find them later. This is a total loss, in insurance terms.

Jesus speaks in radical terms here. He does not bring a peace the world recognizes, one in which there is an absence of conflict but he is offering a real Shalom, that is what the last part of the text is talking about, a real relationship with him and the Father who sent him. Jesus will smash our earthly concept of peace; He wields the sword of His Word. He comes to realign our lives completely, even the most basic elements of our lives. He has come to raise the dead. He puts no patch on an old garment or new wine in an old wineskin. He makes anew, and that remaking is done in a new relationship with God which takes form in the service even to the little one who stands in need of a cup of water.

In this sense, losing life for Christ is the real peace. But what is losing one’s life? Is this martyrdom? Or is this the life that is lost one little act of service at a time as we give of ourselves to others?

Christianity is really odd this way, this is the peace that passes understanding. We expect things to go from beginning, to middle, and then end. But Christianity does this all mixed up. We go to the Baptismal font to die, ending life. But the font which is our tomb is also our womb. We are born again. Then the rest of life is the middle, flowing out of the beginning and lived in light of that ending. We have surprising order of life: end, beginning, middle!

Perhaps it is helpful to us to remember Matthew’s audience. He seems to be writing to the Jewish Christians of the first century who have been expelled from the Jewish synagogues. It appears that initially the Jewish Christians continued to meet in the synagogues with their fellow Jews.

Then something happened in the middle of the century which changed that. Paul was still able to start many of his congregations among Jewish people; although, as we see in several cities there was considerable tension (Thessalonica, Corinth, etc.). Many have speculated that the watershed event was the Jewish rebellion of 68-70 AD in which the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. The Christian Jews apparently did not participate in the rebellion, appealing to their allegiance to their real king who is Jesus. When the temple, the very heart of the Jewish faith at the time, was destroyed, some have suggested that the Jewish population lashed out at the Christian Jews in their midst. "If you had helped us, this would not have happened," seems to be the logic at work. As early as the 80's we find documents from synagogue worship that began with curses on anyone who followed the Nazarene, Jesus, the Christ.

For Matthew's audience, families divided, lives lost for Jesus, and much turmoil was not just a topic for Bible study, but was the reality they faced. Matthew seems to tell them with his whole book and this passage in particular that Jesus has seen their sacrifices, acknowledged them, and promises to make it all worthwhile for them.

But there is another interesting dynamic that takes place when a community is fractured and the members turn on one another. Some people are given the gift of peace making, some are given the gift of love and charity, despite the harsh rhetoric. When the community turned on the Christian Jews and expelled them from the synagogue this would have also had an impact upon their relationships. Friends were lost, families were torn up. But undoubtedly some were able to cross those chasms, those divisions.

Think about the old-line Jewish person who simply showed kindness and hospitality to a Jewish Christian because they were Jewish? What about the person who gave Christians a cup of cold water, opened their home to them, welcomed them, received them? It might have been at considerable risk to themselves, it might have jeopardized their own place in the community or subjected them to harassment or even threats of physical violence. The Christian may have asked, "God, what will happen to them?" Through Matthew, Jesus is telling these folks that God has seen these acts of kindness as well.

If they were kind to you, they were kind to Jesus. We will have to leave that up to him to decide how to reward them, but the promise is that Jesus received the cup of cold water they offered to you when you really needed it. Remember He has united himself to us. We are his body. That not only applies to the moments when we speak his word and someone hears His voice in our voice, but it also seems to be when we are being persecuted for the faith. When Jesus confronts Saul on the road to Damascus, He does not say, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting **my people?**” He asks “Why are you persecuting **me?**”

So, what are we to say about this? We are not really being persecuted for our faith, at least not like this. We still might reasonably hope to have our whole family in the faith. If not, we probably are not being asked to choose between the relationship with our children and our own salvation. Few of our delinquent children will ask us to abandon our faith in order for them to attend Thanksgiving dinner. We still have hope for those we know and love who are not in Church. And we pray that they will someday come back.

But just because we are not being persecuted for the faith, at least in an obvious, active and organized way, this does not mean the tempter is not working. In truth, I believe he often switches tactics. We need to understand our individual situation and apply this text to it. The Devil’s whole goal, remember, is to disrupt that discipleship thing – the listening to the Word and the subsequent doing of it. Persecution is a rather crude and often counter-productive method of doing that. More refined or appropriate methods can accomplish the same: that people don’t listen, people don’t do, they are not transformed by the Gospel message into people who desire and live differently than they did before they heard that message.

What discourages **us** from hearing? What has discouraged the folks who are not here from hearing? What good work has God given us to do to combat that? When we do hear the good news, what keeps us from putting that good news into practice in our lives, especially in terms of being the forgiving, inviting, loving people God has created us to be in Christ?

Jesus tells us that it is worth it. It might not come cheaply to us, but it is worth it, no matter the cost. Jesus also tells us that this life lived is intimately connected to Him, so that every little deed done **to** us becomes a deed done **to** Him, and likewise, the deeds done **by** us can become deeds done **by** Him. Is that the piece that is missing from our hearts and minds?

Maybe this is a time to remember the old Baptismal practice in which candidates for Baptism divested themselves of their money, home, clothes, and all worldly possessions prior to entering the water. Upon ascending from the font, those things would be returned to them with the admonition to use them, live with them to the glory of Christ and the Father. Maybe that is what Jesus is saying with these words.

Jesus wrapped himself into the lives of sinful people. He wraps himself into our lives every Sunday when we stick our hands out and someone says “take and eat, the body of Christ, given for you for the forgiveness of sins.”

It reminds me of the band, Tenth Avenue North’s old song: “Let it Go.”

You say let it go, You say let it go
 You say life is waiting for the one to lose control
 You say you will be, everything I need
 You said if I lose my life it's then I'll find my soul
 You say let it go.

We never really have control of our lives. It is an illusion. We had no control over being brought into existence. And we have no control over when we leave. Although we think we do. We can plan, eat right, get exercise, avoid excesses. But accidents, and plagues, and violence can take our lives at any moment, as can the unforeseen infection, heart attack, or aneurism. Hear God’s Word:

Job 12:10 In God’s hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.

Job 14:1-5 Man born of woman has a few short days, and they are full of anxiety.² He blossoms like a flower, but soon withers. He recedes like a shadow and does not remain.

³ You keep your eye on such a man. You bring him into judgment in your presence. ⁴ Who can produce something pure from something that is impure? No one. ⁵ Certainly his days are determined. The number of his months has been set by you. A limit is set, which he cannot exceed.

John 6:54 The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the Last Day.

Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I am now living in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me.

Brothers and sisters, come back to the Baptismal font and remember, it was there you died with Christ and were raised to new life, adopted by the Holy Spirit to be a child of the heavenly Father and an heir of His kingdom. Come to the Lord's Table, take and eat His very body and drink His blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins and new life. Hear His words of life, His forgiveness won for you by His death on the cross and new life for you in His resurrection.

God's word is like a two-edged sword; it slays and it makes alive again. The Spirit of God searches us out and testifies to Jesus. Eureka! He has found us!

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting! Amen!