

September 13

Losing One's Life

Mark 8:27-38

We read this passage and hear Jesus say, "Whoever would save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them." Let me ask you a question. Are you challenged by those words? My guess is that we rarely ask: "How could they be literally true in my life?" We relegate them to a thought that we are all to sacrifice a little for Jesus. After all, that is what taking up our cross means, right? Yet deep down we know they mean more. Think for a moment about this idea. What if the words of Jesus about losing one's life to find it were literally true? These words turn out to be true for Jesus as he does, in fact, lose his life and finds it, or really is given it back and more, in the resurrection. So here's my question: might this also be literally, concretely true for us? That is, in what ways have we also experienced losing our life as the key to receiving it back again?

Have we at times noticed, for example, that when we give a gift to another we recognize how much we receive in return? Or have you discovered that only by loving another do you feel yourself to be loved? Have you ever gone without so that someone could have more and felt intensely richer as a result? We have all figured out that there's no better way to find a friend than first to be a friend. That unexpected rewards come through sacrifice. And so on. Our own experiences prove that God still loves to create out of nothing, raise the dead to life, and give each and all of us so much more than we either deserve or can imagine. All of this tells us that when Jesus talks about losing your life to find it, he was not talking just about what was to come in his life, but wanted us all to glimpse the "inverted logic of the kingdom" and see how it can enhance our lives.

Now you might be asking: "What is the inverted logic of the kingdom?" It is a way of looking at life, its values and priorities that is dramatically different than the logic that runs the kingdoms of the world. This logic -- one we are taught from a very early age -- suggests that the only way to find security is through possessions or power. This logic

attempts to persuade us that only by having more can we be happy, and that only by satisfying all our wants can we be content. This logic operates on a notion of absolute scarcity and therefore pits us against one another in a winner-takes-all competition for goods, meaning, and love. It's all around us because it's the logic behind almost all advertising campaigns, political rhetoric, and commercial decisions. This logic enters our vocabulary. We talk about climbing the ladder of success. We celebrate when one we love gets promoted and are worried when they are not the one chosen fearing their job might be at an end. We often equate success with large salaries. When we hear of people quitting jobs to do something they like we speak of them opting out and usually that is not seen as a good thing. This is the logic of the kingdoms of the world. This is what we are taught and we know that this logic brings with it intense competitiveness, possessiveness and status consciousness and none of these are life giving or bring us any real sense of contentment or fulfillment.

Jesus challenges us to live his kingdom view; a lifestyle where in losing we win, in giving we receive, to lead is to serve, and in ending we find beginnings. He promises us that if we do this we will find life abundant, contentment and true happiness. It is something we have glimpsed as being true because we have experienced it but we find it hard to fully embrace. It is scary to think about losing our life, even in small ways, for the good of the Gospel. And yet Jesus continually urges us to give of ourselves, put others first, and take up burdens on behalf of another. He does this not to punish us or to create in us a disciplined faith life. He challenges us this way because Jesus knows that this is what is best! Think of those times when you have given into those urgings and followed Jesus' inverted logic instead of embracing the logic of the world. Have you not found life?

Let me give you a couple of short examples. Some years ago there were the floods that happened south of Olympia. The church in Bellingham sent a group of five to help with some of the clean-up. We got up early that day so we would arrive at the command center at the designated time. We were assigned to a house that had been inundated with water up to almost the ceiling. Groups before us had stripped away the sheetrock, carpet, cabinets and wiring. Our task was to finish cleaning out the mud that

remained and wash everything with a bleach solution to stop any mold. Beyond that we were asked to haul away as much mud from the foundation outside as we could. We spent the day in the cold, covered with mud, working until we were all so tired we could do nothing more. On the way home one of the five, who was not a regular attender of the church, said "This was one of the best days ever!" She gave of herself and it felt good.

I was at camp and we were having some kind of relay race. One of the groups was super competitive and they were way out in front of the competition. The last person of their team had to just walk quickly and they would have won. Instead of doing that she waited for the other team's runner to catch up and walked with her across the line so the competition ended in a tie. Her teammates heaped abuse on her for doing this. When I asked her later why she did what she did, I will never forget her answer: "I didn't want the other team to feel bad for losing. That isn't what camp is about." She was living a different paradigm and didn't care if she took some abuse for her actions because it was the right thing.

It's no wonder that Jesus' kingdom still has trouble attracting applicants who will follow his example. In both of my illustrations the people following Jesus' words ended up in challenging situations. When the world says use your free time for things you want to do, win and don't think about the other, while Jesus says that in order to be a full participating member you need to be willing to be last, not first, it is not very appealing in our top down world. Later he'll lift up the most vulnerable -- children, the outcast, and the diseased -- as models of exemplary citizens. Who really wants to be part of this club? Jesus is proclaiming an anti-kingdom that is so utterly opposite of what we imagine a kingdom should be. No wonder he is not only disbelieved but also rejected: he isn't just an unusual king, he is the anti-king, almost the exact opposite of the kings of the world. Yet we are told this kingdom brings us real life.

It's incredibly hard to choose to lose your life for the sake of the Gospel because so much money and energy has gone into convincing us that an opposing view is actually what brings us happiness. Most of the time, we go around feeling that the best we can expect from life is a quid-pro-quo world where you get what you deserve. That

at least makes us feel we are rewarded for our efforts but it rarely brings fulfillment. It just places us on the ladder of life. Whatever rung we are on, there are those above us that we strive to emulate, and those below us whom we try to ignore or at least to not feel guilty about having moved past them. Jesus invites us into a different reality. If we can let it go, even for a few moments, this world view, we'll discover that God still loves to create out of nothing, raise the dead to life, and give each and all of us so much more than we either deserve or can imagine.

We find life by receiving the gift of becoming a beloved child rather than trying to earn it through our accomplishments. This is so counter to our views. The greatest gift we can be given is the gift of forgiveness and eternal life. And they are a gift. You cannot earn them! If they are a gift, not a possession, then we are free to give them away for we know they will be replenished. This kind of a thought invites us to find our purpose in serving others rather than in accumulating goods. It invites us to imagine that our life -- and the lives of those around us -- have infinite worth simply because God chooses to love us apart from anything we've done or not done. This kingdom is about life, not the pseudo-life we've been persuaded by advertisers or politicians it's the best we can expect, but real, honest-to-goodness life.

This week I want to challenge you to try to live by Jesus words. Lose your life in putting someone else's needs first. Be willing to give something away with no thought of return, just because, see where beginnings can happen in the face of endings, let go of thoughts about status or position. Then, after doing that, even for a moment reflect on how you feel. What you are feeling is life, the real abundant life God offers each of us if we are willing to no longer serve the kings of this world. That feeling can be addictive. It can become a habitual way of living. Just what Jesus would hope would happen.