

Sermon Aug 30, 2020
Redeemer Ramsey
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Grace mercy and peace from God, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

As we bring ourselves and our faith into the presence of God in worship this morning, and into the light of the Gospel and other scriptural passages, we find we are confronted by an uncompromising vision of Jesus' mission. This passage from the Gospel of Matthew comes to us today at a time of deep social and political discord in our nation, and also a time of great stress and anxiety because of the Corona Virus pandemic. What does Jesus' teaching have to say to us in these times?

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus delivers his first official prediction of the arrest, torture, and death that awaits him in Jerusalem. Peter, speaking first and for the other disciples, as he usually does, tells Jesus that this should never happen to Jesus. Then, suddenly, Jesus rounds on Peter with a ferocious rebuke, telling Peter, "Get behind me, Satan." Then Jesus calls Peter a stumbling block, someone who gets in the way of Jesus' mission, someone who is focused on human things, and not on divine things. Then Jesus turns to the other disciples and proclaims this promise; "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 big question for interpretation is what Jesus means by "Life", and what he means by saying you can save it or lose it.

The literal meaning of these words, particularly the second part of the phrase, is perhaps the easiest to understand. Literally losing our life for Jesus' sake is what we call martyrdom. To live your life for Jesus, this is the way of the martyrs of the faith, saints who were willing to court bodily harm, or even death, in order to remain faithful to the Gospel. There is a feast day on June 12 in the Roman Catholic Church calendar for a group of people called the 108 Polish martyrs. They were a group of Christians, chosen for this honor from among many thousand Christian Polish people who died during WWII. The 108 Polish Martyrs are made

up of several Catholic bishops, priests, monks, nuns and some lay people, who were killed by the Nazis during the German occupation of Poland between 1939 and 1945. We understand that in Jesus' terms, they lost their lives for Jesus' sake, and have gained, or found eternal life in the light of God's eternal kingdom.

We also understand this more figuratively, and with regard to other causes that are not explicitly Christian. You can "give your life" to something by dedicating your life to that thing, whether it be a cause or a career, or an organization. I know a pastor whose young teenager died tragically, and he and his wife started a charitable foundation in their son's name. It is fair to say they have given their lives to this foundation, out of dedication to their son.

Another way to approach the teaching is to look at two ways of living that Jesus is juxtaposing. This way, we can clarify the kind of life you can lose or save. On the one hand, there is the saved life, or better, the preserved life, which is saved or preserved for our own sake. On the other hand, there is the lost life, our life lost or given for Jesus' sake. I know this might seem confusing, since the word "saved" is often associated with Christian salvation, and we speak of being saved by Jesus. But here I want to keep using the phrase "saved life" for our interpretation of this lesson as the way of living that Jesus is condemning.

The life you are trying to save, or salvage for yourself, is the saved life. The saved life is the life that we try to live when we ignore the demands of God or the Gospel. It is the life we think we can preserve for ourselves by pursuing our own agenda, our own goals, our own plans, without any reference to God.

I'm not saying that having a plan or goals for your life is bad. What I mean is that in this reading, Jesus is saying it is bad to have goals or plans for your life *without regard for God's will or desire*. A famous example of this is the life of Ebenezer Scrooge, in Charles Dickens's story "A Christmas Carol." Scrooge lived a selfish life, focused on his own profit and pleasure, and he cared little for the hardships of the people around him. Before the Ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future get to him, he is busy living trying to save his life, for himself.

The lost life, I interpret as the life lived for God, in the fullest sense that we can imagine it. This is the life we live when we have dedicated our life to God, when we have chosen to put God's plan or agenda or goals above our own. Paramount

examples of this are those people we normally refer to as saints. These are the people who have become well known for their generosity, their selflessness, and their dedication to the welfare of others, and to those who are suffering.

Monks and nuns are often viewed this way, because they take vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. They are making the choice to live the “lost life” for Jesus’ sake, in a very explicit way.

Dorothy Day is a famous example of a Christian lay person who lived her life in service to the Gospel in a very explicit way. She gave her life to the Catholic Worker Movement, which worked to serve the poor and homeless in New York during and after the Great Depression.

A Lutheran example is the Swedish economist, Dag Hammarskjöld. His feast day in the Lutheran liturgical calendar is coming up on September 18th. Dedicating his life to international peace making, He became the 2nd secretary-general of the United Nations in 1953. After he died tragically in 1961 on his way to a peace keeping mission in southern Africa, his journals were discovered, and in them, he expressed a deep and sincere Christian faith that few people knew about. Yet, this Christian faith was then no surprise to those who had followed how selflessly he worked to help restore peace and stability to various regions in crisis around the world. He is the only person to have been awarded the Noble Peace Prize after his death. These are examples of the “lost life” as Jesus refers to it in today’s Gospel lesson.

Now, for most of us, I think it is safe to say that we are living life somewhere in the middle of these two extreme examples. We hope that we are not Scrooge, simply living for ourselves, or just our little nuclear family, competing with everyone else around us, for resources, opportunities, fame and fortune. We also know we are not really living our life like the great saints of the church. We are somewhere in between. Somedays, we really do make sacrifices that are truly generous and gracious toward others who are in need, and then other days, we can act pretty selfishly and refuse to take another’s needs into account.

Here, again and again, we simply must throw ourselves on the grace and mercy of God, and ask God to forgive our selfishness, and turn that energy into love, care and compassion for other people. This is why I refer to repentance as the

foundation of Christian living. In our confession at the start of each Sunday's service, we confess these words together:

**we confess that we do not trust your abundance,
and we deny your presence in our lives.**

**We place our hope in ourselves
and rely on our own efforts.**

We fail to believe that you provide enough for all.

We abuse your good creation for our own benefit.

**We fear difference and do not welcome others
as you have welcomed us.**

When you confess these words, with a sincere heart, you are acknowledging the fact that you have been trying to live the "saved life" that Jesus warns us about, and not the "lost life" he extolls.

Indeed, flip all of those statements in the confession, make the opposite true, and you have a fair model of the "lost life":

To trust God's abundance, acknowledge God's presence in our lives, put our hope in God alone, and not rely on our own efforts. Believe and trust that God will provide enough for all, use God's good creation for the benefit of all people, and welcome others, especially those different from us.

To acknowledge that we are not living up to these standards is an honest admission. When we repent of these shortcomings, we are responding in faith to Jesus' mission and his call to us. And when we hear the words of absolution, spoken to us after the confession, and when we trust that what they say about us is true at that moment, then we are also responding in faith; In faith, we believe it to be true that, by the radical abundance of divine mercy we have peace with God through ✠ Christ Jesus, through whom we have obtained grace upon grace.

Indeed, and thank God, our sins are forgiven.

Trusting and believing this truth testifies to the world that God's patient mercy continues to preserve our lives as his redeemed children.

Once freed in Christ from the sin of living the “saved life”, we go back out into the world, and live and work among people who may or may not know this distinction, and who may not know about God’s grace to forgive.

When we return to approach the world, we see people struggling with the stress of the pandemic. Indeed, in this situation, many of us are giving up things all the time. Every time you agree to wear a mask inside the store, you might think of it as a small sacrifice, losing a bit of life for the sake of a greater cause. Then, with regard to the social and political unrest we see, we look at others, trying to “save their” life, to protect it from some perceived threat, even to the point of carrying weapons in public. Some of these people may even admit that they are trying to “preserve their way of life”. It is a telling phrase. We see others trying to change society by protest and work stoppages. To the extent that they court some kind of sacrifice for the cause, we see what they are doing more as “losing their life” for something bigger. In either case, the most telling point is always what basic motivation lies at the heart of each way of living.

WE are called by Christ to get behind him and follow him. His way leads first to the cross, and to the great loss that it represents. But, Christians are also called to the truth of the resurrection. On the other side of that “lost life” is the found life that never dies. It is the true salvation we are all being called into. On this side of Easter, we are led by the risen Christ into a losing that will gain us our lives in the end, by his grace. Amen.