

Sermon June 22, 2014

“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it”....Matthew 10

Good morning.

Sometimes, as a joke, when people say to me, “You’re going to an awful lot of meetings these days “, I answer: “I don’t have a life”. To extend the joke a little further, I have threatened to put that phrase on my tombstone...

Today I want to talk about the passage from the readings where Jesus speaks about “having a life”. In the Gospel reading from Matthew, He says “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

I suspect this is one of those passages which perennially amaze and confuse, and which we can debate throughout our whole lives. I have actually preached more or less on the same topic once before. And I do think that a person has a different perspective on these words at different times, depending on what’s going on with them.

Years ago, the women of St. Michael’s went on a retreat, I think to Glastonbury Abbey, and one of the things we talked about was this very passage. It puzzled me then, as it still puzzles me some today, and while I was there I wrote an essay about it. This is what I wrote:

“Jesus came to me when I was sitting in my living room. I was enjoying how the room looked, with its order and beauty, which I had worked very hard on and spent some money to achieve. Jesus said: “Leave all of this and come with me!” I was horrified, and very frightened---not because I had seen Jesus, but because He wanted me to leave my safe, beautiful, comfortable place. I stood up and began to pace. “Why me?” I asked. “Why now? I’m just beginning to get it right. Could you come back a little later? I’ll be more ready then...”

Jesus said, “No, I couldn’t. I’m here now. I’m not going to be here again so I need you to come now. But I’ll relent for a minute. I know there’s a part of you that wants to come with me. I’m looking around at this room and I don’t see what’s so special about it, frankly. Do you know what will happen to all this when you leave it? The kids will come and take a few things and sell the rest. The room will be empty again. Someone else will live here, or the building will crumble or be torn down, or it might burn. No matter what, it will never be the way you have it, not ever again.”

I said, "I know. I really do know all this. But I still can't come with you. This is where I am safe. This is my center. This is where I know who I am. If I leave it behind me, I will no longer know who I am, or what I'm supposed to do, or how to structure my days, or even what I'm supposed to think about!"

Jesus said, "Does this mean that you are nothing more than a few pieces of furniture? You have a spirit that is far more than these possessions, and you have an immortal life. That is what I have come for."

I began to cry. "I want to come", I said, "but I can't. I'm only human. It's too hard! Is this my only chance? Will I ever see you again? Please don't be mad at me!"

And then Jesus was gone."

A little harsh, maybe. Pretty black and white, too. It was a good many years ago, and I've had some time to reflect and change my mind some since I wrote it. I think what you just heard in that little essay is how a lot of us think about that passage from Matthew: either or. We can have this earthly, materialistic life or we can have a saintly, spiritual one, and they can't exist together. And only about one in a million give it up and live the godly life. The rest of us are stuck in a weird place that mixes pleasure and regret. Because we aspire to be good, even perfect, some little part of us thinks we might be able to be monks, aesthetes, or--- remembering how they set forth to proselytize with only the clothes on their backs--- the disciples.

Friends, it's not going to happen. We need another way to think about our lives--one we can live with, so to speak. This is not a passage that will destroy the soul---and we don't really have to take it at face value.

Hall and I talked about this passage as I was preparing to write about it. He told me he believes that what is beautiful and wonderful and precious for him, the very people and things and places that would be impossible to give up, are actually our way of seeing God in all things. When we love our children and grandchildren to distraction, when we admire great art, when we take what seems like extraordinary pleasure in our garden or something we have cooked, when there is a place on earth where, if we could never visit it again, we might want to pack it all in and say, "Forget it. It's not worth living any more"---this is God speaking to us, showing us His face.

Is it conceivable that here we are facing one of those strange contradictions that we find over and over again in the Bible, where God turns our finite earthly preconceptions upside down? This one happens again and again, in various manifestations: what we saw in our limited, human way expands and grows into something far more wonderful than we could have imagined. Death becomes life. It is the Resurrection over and over again.

So that what sounds like a harsh and difficult pronouncement: “those who lose their life for my sake” actually may not be as frightening as we had thought. It may be that Jesus wants us to lose not the substance of our lives but the way we think about our lives. Instead of loving each person, each place, each object, each color and sound and word just for itself, we begin to see that they carry in them the means to see God. Thinking about it this way means we don’t deny our lives, we embrace them. And it means that in some way we have achieved something astonishing: our own small version of heaven on earth. It means that God is here with me, in my living room again, but instead of walking out on me, He is part of my life, part of everything I love and hold dear, if I will acknowledge His presence.

Do we deserve that? That is another sermon! For now, as I have said before, let’s relax a little and love what’s in our lives not just because they are the things of this world and might disappear but because through them we might see the beautiful face of God. And that will endure forever.

I want to share with you a poem I wrote that has some bearing on this subject. It’s called “For What Is This Life?”

For What Is This Life ?

For what is this life?
Not so much, after all, except
I remember a bird’s song
a maple tree burning red
a little soup bubbling in a pot
And one summer night,
the moon in and out of the clouds;
we were walking down a grassy slope
our bodies were barely touching
but I have never forgotten.

And here is a beautiful passage from “Charlotte’s Web” by E.B White, who says it all so much better than I could:

Charlotte is dying. She is speaking to Wilbur, the pig: “These autumn days will shorten and grow cold. The leaves will shake loose from the trees and fall. Christmas will come, then the snows of winter. You will live to enjoy the beauty of the frozen world. Winter will pass, the days will lengthen, the ice will melt in the pasture pond. The song sparrow will return and sing, the frogs will awake, the warm wind will blow again. All these sights and sounds will be yours to enjoy--this lovely world, these precious days.”

Amen