

“Losing It” GPPC 2-25-18
Psalm 22:23-31, Mark 8:31-38

Some truths are hard to learn, but when we finally learn them our entire existence is changed. The way we view life, and thus live life shifts. And we are never the same again.

In Mark’s gospel we hear Jesus tell his disciples what is coming. He says he is going to go through terrible suffering and be rejected by the religious leaders of the time. And not only is he going to be rejected but he’s actually going to be killed, (by the Roman Empire, as it turns out), only to rise again after three days. And unlike other things he has told the disciples with veiled language and parables, Jesus makes this declaration openly and boldly.

It’s hard to overstate how shocking his statement must be to his disciples. After all, the disciples have left behind homes, families, and work to follow Jesus for three years, because they believe he is the long-awaited Messiah. And everybody knows what will happen when the Messiah comes—no more getting pushed around by the Romans and the slimy traitors who are assisting them. As one scholar puts it, the Messiah

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“...is destined by God to put down the oppressors by means of supernatural power...” (Douglas R.A. Hare, *Mark*, 99.) So what’s envisioned is not just a sweet military victory but a renewed status for God’s people, a position of great freedom and power. Glory days again, yet even better.

But here in Mark’s gospel Jesus not only says the religious leaders are not going to celebrate him but he’s actually going to be rejected and even murdered before rising from the dead after three days. Can we imagine how confusing and disheartening this must be to the disciples?

Well, this isn’t Peter’s first day at the faith rodeo. And he isn’t having any of what Jesus is preaching. Peter takes Jesus aside, apparently to let him know how things are in “the real world.” (Messiahs can be so unrealistic, you know). Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, warns him, censures him. Thank you for talking some sense to Jesus for us, Peter!

But then Jesus does something odd. He turns and looks at his disciples before he speaks to Peter. Why? Why not just look at Peter? Because what he is going to say to Peter is as much for the disciples (and for us) as it is for Peter. Jesus looks at his disciples in every age and then

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says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You’re setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

According to Jesus, Peter’s attitude is so wrong that it’s not merely mistaken; it’s satanic. What does Satan look like? A red devil with horns and a tail? No. A little girl whose head swivels and she cusses and vomits pea soup? No. Monsters, ghosts, witches, vampires? No. What does Satan, God’s adversary look like? The Satan of good intentions. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, “There is nothing more dangerous in all the world than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”

As we Americans continue to witness the obscenity of our children, God’s children, our brothers and sisters murdered by guns in our country more than any other country on earth, we must be willing to go beyond good intentions. We should demand that Congress have the Centers for Disease Control do research on gun violence as a public health emergency, suggest solutions, and then Congress should implement a comprehensive plan that will make it rare.

Jesus is not actually saying that Peter *is* Satan. He’s saying that Peter’s attitude is so opposed to God’s way in Jesus Christ that it is evil,

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just as Satan, (literally “the Adversary”) is evil. Why is Peter so opposed to what Jesus has promised is going to happen? We can’t read Peter’s mind, but as we’ve already said, what Jesus predicts is not the expectation for the Messiah. Maybe Peter also loves Jesus so much that it’s hard for him to imagine Jesus being rejected and killed. And maybe Peter also thinks, “If this happens to Jesus, what is going to happen to me?”

So Jesus speaks again. This time he calls the crowd with the disciples. Why? Because what he is going to say applies not just to Peter, not just to the little band of disciples, not just to the people who seem to be here at church all the time but to anyone and everyone who would dare to follow Jesus. What Jesus is going to say applies to *every single Christian*.

“If you want to follow me, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you’ll lose it, and if you lose your life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, you’ll save it.”

The words of Jesus seem to make no sense, right? Deny yourself and take up a cross, an instrument of torture and the most shameful

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death, and follow me. Save your life and lose it. Lose your life and save it.

Jesus is messing up the church's "marketing" plan. How in the world does anybody get a prosperity gospel out of this? How are we going to convince people that God wants us to be rich and famous with Jesus talking like this? How can we build a mega-church with a Starbucks and a food court with this kind of rhetoric from Jesus?

But we believe these are words that shift and shape our lives. On the words of Jesus hang life and death. If we choose a life focused upon ourselves, our petty wants, our little desires, our revenges, our every comfort, me, me, me, then we choose death. But if we choose a life of denying ourselves in order to follow Christ and to live out service to Christ, even though it is sometimes difficult, sometimes causes us to be vilified, sometimes even gets us killed, then we actually choose life. This is the paradox of human existence, and this is the nature of Christian discipleship.

It is also so stinking hard that we oppose it and evade it. I'm with preacher Ernie Campbell who asked, "If I'm following Jesus, why am I

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such a good insurance risk?” A church member quits the church and says, “I need to feel joyful in worship.” Well, talk to Jesus about it.

Taking up your cross was his idea, not mine.

We are deeply resistant to losing our lives and taking up our cross. We come to church not with our backs ready to shoulder the weight of the cross but with our mouths ready to impose a set of demands. So, again and again, we come back to God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ, when we fail to take up our cross. And we ask God to help us get up and try to follow again. We recall that Jesus did not shy from taking up his cross for us. So we ask God to forgive our failures, to give us courage to do what we are called to do, to trust in the resurrection that is coming.

Notice Jesus does not say, “Take up *a* cross,” or “Take up *the* cross.” He says, “Take up *your* cross and follow me.” In other words, there will be something painful, something tough, for each person who would dare to follow Jesus. For the first followers of Jesus, following Jesus might actually get you crucified by the Romans (the most painful and shameful death known at the time). And you might end up carrying the horizontal beam of the cross they crucified you with.

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Probably for most of us now, taking up our cross to follow Jesus, losing our lives to follow Jesus, will be more about the daily grind of discipleship. Forgiving when we'd rather hold a grudge. Being generous when we'd prefer to be selfish. Speaking the truth in love, even though it gets us attacked. Practicing patience when we just want things our way. Engaging in acts of sacrificial love that do not get us glory and are often frustrating. And sometimes the call to lose our life and take up our cross to follow Jesus comes in even more dramatic ways.

During World War II when Nazis antisemitism exploded into the Holocaust, Christians had to make a choice between obeying Hitler or following Christ. In occupied Holland, the ten Boom family saved Jewish adults and children from the Nazis by hiding them in secret rooms in their home attached to their watch repair shop, and having the children remain very quiet to avoid detection. But on one occasion the family was presented with a two-week-old baby to hide. And, of course, a baby that young could not be asked or expected to remain quiet.

What could be done? One day Corrie ten Boom, one of the family's daughters, hoped she had found a solution when a pastor and

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friend who had a somewhat secluded home showed up for a watch repair. Corrie took the man to a safe location in the home and asked, “Would you be willing to take a Jewish mother and her baby into your home? They will almost certainly be arrested otherwise.”

Corrie writes, “Color drained from the man’s face. He took a step back from me. ‘Miss ten Boom! I do hope you’re not involved with any of this illegal concealment and undercover business. It’s just not safe! Think of your father! And your sister—she’s never been strong!’” Corrie asked the pastor to stay where he was. And she went and brought the baby to him to see. As he looked at the infant she could see the pastor struggle with his decision, but at last came his answer. “No. Definitely not. We could lose our lives for that Jewish child!”

Corrie writes, “Unseen by either of us, Father had appeared in the doorway. ‘Give the child to me, Corrie,’ he said. Father held the baby close, his white beard brushing its cheek, looking into the little face with eyes as blue and innocent as the baby’s own. At last he looked up at the pastor. ‘You say we could lose our lives for this child. I would consider

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that the greatest honor that could come to my family.’” (Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, 98-99.)

Eventually the Nazis did discover what the ten Boom family was doing and they sent them to a concentration camp. Corrie’s father and her sister lost their lives there. But the whole family also *found* their lives as they took up their cross and followed Jesus.

What would you and I have done? I hope I would not have been that cowardly pastor. I pray I would have been brave like the ten Boom family. What would you and I have done? And what would we do if something similar happened to us today? As we live in a world driven by bigotry, hatred, greed, violence, and lies, what are we doing right now to take up our cross? What are we doing? God grant us courage and commitment. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal

Guided meditation: I invite you now to close your eyes, if you are willing. Close your eyes. And we will engage in a guided meditation. Allow yourself to sit relaxed where you are. Feel yourself grounded. Breathe slowly and deeply. Slowly and deeply. Imagine your life now. What it is easy and pleasant that you enjoy? Can you see it? Give thanks.

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Now turn and ask God to show you what your cross is. Maybe you already know. What difficult thing is God asking you, calling you to do, in order to be faithful, to lose your life, but also to find your life? What is it? Now ask God to give you strength to do what lies ahead. We ask in Christ our Lord who took up his cross for us and for the world. Amen.