
Losing, Giving Up Things, and Losing Graciously

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Proper 19 – Year B

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. -- Mark 8:34-35

I lost something yesterday. And the day before that, I gave up something. Last month, I gave up a lot.

On the face of it, these were little things, small matters. I can mention all sorts of incidents in the past few years where I have given up things. In all these matters, I didn't get my way.

The other day, I was driving in town, and I came to a 4-way stop sign intersection. And yet I ended up waiting for a car who had clearly arrived at the intersection after I had. I had to yield. I didn't get my way. It irritated me. The incident got stuck and repeated in my head.

The other day, I went to the store to get my favorite ice cream. They were out, and I had to make other plans. Another day, we actually had a small family dinner, and I was outvoted in my choice for the main dish. (Obviously, in such decisions, I realize that the children's votes count twice as much as the adults' votes!)

These are small incidents, aren't they? Trivial things.

But we all live with them, and with larger disappointments and losses, too. I don't even necessarily mean illnesses and tragedies, though those definitely count. We lost much on 9/11, twenty years ago. We have lost much due to Covid-19. Today, however, I mean the ordinary events in life where we do not get our way, where we give up something that we wanted.

Maybe it is a decision at work that did not go our way. Our project was not accepted. One of our colleagues got the raise instead of us. Maybe it was a political election that did not go our way. Our candidate did not prevail. The other guy won. The other girl won. Maybe it was a court decision that did not go our way.

I am sure you can add to the list. When I mention these incidents, most of them seem trivial, don't they? Who cares that I couldn't get my favorite ice cream? But I felt as slighted as a stifled five-year old! And, of course, some of these events have much greater consequences.

But what I mean to present, this morning, is the overwhelming set of occurrences, each and every day, that do not go our way. Where we lose. Where we give up something.

These losses affect us. They disturb us. They unsettle us, in some cases, so much, that we act more aggressively the next time we face a crossroads, or the next time we are arguing our case. Worse, some of us lose control completely.

We have all encountered much loss, many losses, in the past two years. It's been hard. And it's been loss after loss – rights and privileges and decisions torn away from us, almost daily. It's as if we no longer have even the agency to decide for ourselves.

One of the negative consequences of this time, is that we have also lost the ability to lose graciously. We are out of practice. We have lost the habit of knowing how to lose graciously. Many of us then practice our anger and obstinance instead – towards our spouses, our family, our church, our city, our country, our God.

Where are we supposed to go to restore this habit, this habit of losing graciously? Should we even try to restore it? Should we learn, some of us for the first time, how to lose graciously?

Well, we could come to church.

At church, we hear such things as this wrenching passage from the Gospel of Mark, our lesson for today (Mark 8:27-38). It is one of the most famous stories about Jesus and his disciples. In these short verses, though, Jesus may well be setting out the heart, the essence, of the Christian gospel. It goes like this:

Jesus asked his disciples one day what people thought of him. "Who do people say that I am?" They responded by comparing him with other religious leaders, maybe John the Baptist or Elijah. And, then, Jesus asks the question directly, so directly, to them: "Who do YOU say that I am?" It is Peter, good old Saint Peter, who seems to get the answer right: "You are the messiah."

But Jesus says, "Be quiet. Be quiet, before you get all excited, while I tell you exactly what being the messiah means. It means great suffering, and rejection, and it even means death." The messiah will lose his life.

Peter, good old Saint Peter, cannot handle this. Peter begins to rebuke Jesus. And Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan." He says this to Peter, his closest disciple! "You are not setting your mind on divine things at all, but on earthly things."

It is then that Jesus starts speaking about loss. "If you want to follow me," he says, "you must deny yourself. Those who want to save their life will lose it."

Well, that's it. If you want to save your life, you must lose it. That is the heart of the Christian gospel, straight from the mouth of Jesus our Lord.

We tend to hear these words and think immediately of our one, physical, earthly, life. We all have to die, we think. Maybe the best among us will sacrifice our one physical, earthly, life for the sake of another, maybe as a soldier for the sake of our country.

That would be a noble act, and an honorable calling. But most of us, probably, will not be called to such a literal giving up of our lives. Most of us will never have the occasion of throwing ourselves in front of a child to stop a bullet, or of rushing towards twin towers as they are about to fall. We simply will not, most of us, be called to do that.

Instead, most of us are called, are led, to the daily losses. Jesus calls us, most of the time, to the daily giving up of ourselves. Daily, we learn to lose things. Daily, we learn to give way, to give up our desires, for the sake of someone else. The heart of the Christian gospel is that we learn to give up things every day; we give up our lives every day.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ does not magically make us happy, or get us good jobs, or make us lots of money, or get us elected as political leaders. Or get us a good boyfriend or girlfriend. Being a follower of Jesus Christ does not even cure of us cancer or get rid of the demons inside us. Sometimes it does. And that is wonderful.

But it is not why Jesus calls us to follow him. Jesus calls us to follow him because he desires for us to discover who we truly are. We are supposed to be giving up things, giving up things, giving up things, not piling on things. In that giving up of our lives, we learn who we truly are; and we learn who God is.

Just the other day, it happened again. I was late for another critical dentist appointment. I made the mistake of driving to Peachtree Battle Avenue, in order to go south on Peachtree Road; and that meant, of course, that I was driving by the wonderful E. Rivers School, just as children, and families, and busses, and cars, were arriving for school. The traffic was marvelously handled, but it was clogged. I was at a stop, several times. I let people in, in front of me; people let me in, in front of them. Finally, I was through the traffic, and I was through giving way. I was eager to get on my way, turning right on to Peachtree, while looking left, for a hole in the traffic.

Suddenly, on my right, there was something else in my way, a runner. I caught her eyes, and she made sure to catch both my eyes with hers. I gave her the signal to go ahead, in front of me, and she acknowledged it. As she ran by, she mouthed one word, very clearly to me, "Thanks."

Thanks, she said. It made my day! When we give way, when we lose ourselves for the greater good, the world

says, "Thanks." And our God gives thanks, too.

AMEN.

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