

The Mystery of Faith

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“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” –
Matthew 10:36

As I was putting together this morning's service, it was a toss-up whether I'd take as my text the verse from Matthew's gospel that I chose – “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” – or whether I'd preach on Paul's admonition to the Romans, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” They're both important words for Christians to live by, and they're both difficult to wrap our hearts and minds around. But in the end I chose to remind you of what I believe to be the mysterious core of our Christian faith – that we find our true selves by dying to our false selves for the sake of the gospel. Let me spend a few minutes this morning trying to explain in a bit more detail what I think that means.

The first thing I feel obliged to point out to you is that Jesus' words are a statement of fact; they're not simply advice. Last week, I offered you some advice suitable for those about to graduate as well as for those of us who may have graduated some time ago, but this week I lift up for you not advice but a declaration of the most profound truth we humans have yet discovered, which is that we find our lives by losing them. That's more than a paradox; it's a mystery. We don't know how it works, but we believe that it does. And not only do we Christians believe this, but so do our Jewish ancestors and our Muslim cousins and our Buddhist and Hindu neighbors. If you look at all the world's great religions, you will find some version of this thought – that true life is to be found by relinquishing our grasp on the life we mistakenly believe is true. In other words, we find our true selves by losing our false selves.

Take our Jewish ancestors, for example. The Jewish people have always considered themselves chosen by God, and to an outsider it's easy to misunderstand what chosenness means. To be chosen is to be honored, of course, but it also means that your life is no longer your own. “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God,” Moses told the Israelites just after their liberation from Egypt. “The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Deut. 7:6).

When you are God's treasured possession, you are not your own treasured possession; your life is no longer yours. The people of Israel, as individuals and as a nation, were chosen by God for mission, and the prophet Isaiah articulated what that mission was and remains to this day: “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6).

Israel was chosen, we believe, to bring God's salvation to the world, and Jesus believed that, as an Israelite, he was part of that mission. Jesus never saw his mission in the world to be anything other than what God had chosen Abraham for so many centuries earlier. That's why Jesus initially told his apostles to go nowhere among the Gentiles, but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jesus saw himself not as starting a new mission, but as reforming and repairing the mission to which he and his ancestors had already been called.

So what happened? Well, for a variety of reasons, some of which we looked at last week in our study of the Gospel of John, Jesus fell out with his Jewish contemporaries, and some of his followers, especially Paul, interpreted his mission very differently from the way Jesus understood it. Jesus understood himself and his disciples to be part of that Jewish light to the nations; Paul believed that the non-Jewish nations could become part of that light without first becoming Jewish. And the Jews, quite understandably, disagreed.

And so, less than a century after Jesus, there was a split, and Jesus' group, that had started out as a reform movement within Judaism, became a new religion that eventually became known as Christianity.

But the mission never changed. Its interpretation and its implementation did, but the mission remained to bring salvation to the world. How do we know this? Because the verse in the Bible that more Christians know than any other says so: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have everlasting life." There's the Christian mission, and it's a direct continuation of the Jewish mission, to bring salvation to the entire world. Jews and Christians are called to exactly the same mission – to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. We do it differently, to be sure, but we do it. The world's salvation, for Jews and Christians, is a shared mission.

And so is it for Muslims. The word "Islam" is the Arabic word for "surrender," and it means to surrender one's life to God. By surrendering one's life to God, Islam teaches, one finds one's purpose, one's meaning, one's mission in life. By rebelling, and clinging to our passions and our desires and our sense that we know best, we pull ourselves away from God and fall into sin and violence and destruction. Mohammed, in fact, began Islam as a reform movement in the Arabian peninsula because he saw that his fellow Arabs had fallen into superstition, and through the myriad jinns and sprites and desert spirits, were attempting to manipulate the divine and thus control their own destiny. Into that spiritual willfulness Mohammed introduced a new meaning of the word "islam" – surrender – which is based on the Arabic word for peace, *salam*.

And Hinduism teaches that the surrender of our partial truths to the Absolute Truth, through study, meditation, good conduct, and other practices, leads us to union with God.

And Buddhism teaches that salvation – which is final freedom from suffering – is achieved when we surrender ourselves to living the Eightfold Path: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

And so on. In their own ways, all the world's great religions teach the truth that Jesus taught when he said that we find our lives when we lose them. In our faith, we lose them for the sake of the gospel; in Hinduism for the sake of Absolute Truth; in Islam for the sake of surrender to God's will. The world's great religions, through various means and teachings, all seek to help us free ourselves from ourselves so that we can be united with the divine to bring

salvation to the world.

So if surrendering the false self lies at the center of this great, universal truth, what is a false self? What is that self that we need to lose in order to find our life in Christ? There are many of them, but let me mention a few of the more common.

First, there's the animal self. There's an old saying that tries to explain some of the crazier things we do which says that human beings are pounds of muscle but only ounces of brain. We share pounds of muscle – and instinct and drives and DNA and chromosomes and mortality and lots of other stuff – with the animals, and we have the option to live as they live, and many of us exercise that option. Paul described people like that to the Philippians by saying that “their god is the belly” (3:19). If all you live for is to satisfy your animal cravings, you're never going to realize what it means to be a genuine human being. You'll always be living a false self.

Second, a false self is an egocentric self. If Freud called the animal self the id, then the self-centered self is the ego. The world is all about me. I live for me, myself, and I. That way of living is another false self because, as John Donne famously said, no one is an island. The self-made person is as much a mythological being as a unicorn. At best, we use sound judgment and make good decisions as we go through life – and so reduce the chances of our coming to misfortune – but anyone who thinks that they get through life without a huge amount of luck, grace, and the support and contributions of others is simply living in a false reality – another false self.

Third, a false self is a social self, that is, a self so outwardly directed that it has lost touch with its core, which is the image and likeness of God. This is the self that lives not for others but rather for the favorable opinion of others. This is the person who has so little God-given sense of self, or whose sense of self has been so damaged, that they cannot see themselves except as reflected in the opinions others hold of them. Celebrities and other public figures are especially prone to this kind of false self – they rely almost entirely on others for their sense of self, and sooner or later those others can't give them the ego-satisfaction that they need and they fall to pieces. This, too, is a false self.

Finally, there is the hypocritical self, the self that defines itself by the outward and visible signs of religion but never surrenders itself to the inward and invisible grace that makes all religion authentic. These are the religiously punctilious types – careful to observe all the pieties, all the ceremonies, all the rituals, all the obligations, the feast days and the fast days, the prayers in the morning, the prayers at midday, and the prayers at night – conversant with all the right words, reading the right authors, listening to the right podcasts, tithing just the right amount and then some – and as Jesus said, they are like whitewashed tombs, beautiful to look at, but spiritually full of death and decay. These are the people, as one of my teachers once described them, who defend the right in such a way that you prefer to be wrong. Absolutely sure of themselves because they belong to this or that church or mosque or synagogue, or can quote this or that verse from their sacred text, these folks are entrenched not in God but in their own self-righteousness. I grew up in a kind of Bible-thumping Christianity that was especially prone to this false certitude, and as I've said to people many times since, when you get to the gates of heaven you don't get to wave your Bible in God's face demanding to be let in.

There are many other false selves. Jesus said so when he said that the gate that leads to

destruction is wide and many people find it, but that the gate that leads to eternal life is narrow and not many people will enter it. Eternal life requires a true, authentic self – the self that you find when you lose all the false ones – and that authentic self is the surrendered self.

This is the life that recognizes its constant and absolute dependence on God for every breath, every heartbeat, every firing neural synapse, every blessing, every challenge, every victory and yes, every defeat.

This is the self that works hard to make something of itself not in order to, but rather in response to. This is the self whose sails are filled with that same wind/breath/Spirit of God that moved over the primordial waters of creation and continues to move all creation toward its ultimate end and goal. Yes, we still have decisions to make – and people who cannot make those decisions suffer from psychological and emotional and spiritual problems – but true believers recognize that it is the Spirit's energy that animates us, and that it is the Spirit's voice for which we constantly listen.

That's the great mystery of faith. We find ourselves when we lose ourselves to God. That's what the empty cross represents – Jesus' ultimate loss of himself to this life so that he might be raised to eternal life by God. And that's why, in the celebration of holy communion, we proclaim as the mystery of faith, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

That's the true pattern of life, we believe, in this world and in any world to come, not only for the Christ, but also for the Christian.