

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
September 3, 2023 - 14th Sunday after Pentecost

Laying Down One's Life

In the name of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one Lord and Mother of us all.

This gospel passage from Matthew actually began last week. Asked “Who do you say that I am?” Peter correctly declared Jesus the Messiah and then Jesus declared Peter the rock on which Jesus would build the church. But then things go south. When Peter hears that Jesus is the kind of Messiah who is going to sacrifice himself with great suffering, Peter won't have it. “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Jesus then harshly rebukes him, “Get behind me, Satan!” says Jesus. “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

This is the kind of passage that has inspired big sacrifices. People have heard the call to lay down their life and it has derailed perfectly good careers, someone turning from material opportunity in order to intentionally pursue less money, less recognition. This is the kind of passage that uproots people or families to become missionaries and move to a place with malaria 6000 miles away. Maybe some of you here, today, are sitting with a big decision, maybe you are standing in a fork in the road, and you feel yourself pulled unexpectedly, irrationally, with fear and trembling towards this kind of path of laying down your life in order to find it. I'm always here to talk if it would be helpful.

But I would guess the majority of us are probably not at a hard fork in the road. The majority of us are probably not being called right now to a radical, new path. How might this passage apply to us? What then could laying down your life in order to find it mean?

When I counsel couples for marriage, I emphasize that the message they receive all day, every day from inside their own head and outside them, is pretty much the exact opposite of laying down your life in order to find it. Post-modern American culture is constantly stirring up the opposite line of questioning: “Are you as satisfied as you could possibly be? Do you have the happiest, most comfortable, most convenient life you could possibly have? And if not, what's your problem?” These questions have many roots: our own deep evolutionary wiring for as much security as we can get. Our Western intellectual heritage which prioritizes maximum liberty for the individual. The same amazing free market which produces so much prosperity, so much innovation, has this shadow side, like all good things have a shadow. The shadow side is that the market is largely driven by these constant, subtle whispers: “I am comfortable. But couldn't I be even more comfortable? “This product is so satisfying. But surely there is a way to make it even MORE satisfying.”

When I'm with these couples, we talk about the ways we are unable to recognize this constant pull to satisfy our own needs. It is the water we swim in. It is the air we breathe. And thanks to

smartphones, the market is everywhere all the time, ensuring that I will always be confronted with the question about my own comfort, convenience, satisfaction. So I tell them, “You will have to consciously, intentionally, with all the focus and discipline you can muster, ask this other set of questions: “How is this other person doing? What do they need? What will build them up, bring them joy, make them feel alive? What can I do today to serve them?”

But this same concept applies so much more broadly than marriage. We know that the best life, life with a capital L, the biggest, deepest, most satisfying Life is driven not by pursuing our own pleasure, comfort, and happiness. The biggest, deepest, most satisfying life comes through connecting with others, looking out for them, serving them. The biggest most expansive Life comes through an ever greater awareness that we are grounded in God, the Source of Life. In the course of our week, we have brushes with this Life with a capital L. Maybe we have a vulnerable conversation, maybe we are moved to be generous or someone is moved to be generous to us, maybe we serve another person, a stranger or someone we know, in a very small way, but then it goes through us like a lightning bolt, “My God, this is what living is supposed to be.”

But more and more, we can insulate ourselves from these moments. I was recently listening to an interview with someone talking about how people are losing the skill of making small talk with strangers in public places. Because now when you are in a line at the grocery store, or you are on an elevator, or you are waiting for a machine at the gym everyone is pursuing their own private stimulation on their own private stimulation device. Twenty years ago when you were standing with a bunch of strangers it felt kind of awkward NOT to say something, even something small, “Wow, it’s really hot out.” “How ‘bout those Cubs? Don’t you just hate them with your whole heart?” These little connections that never meant much by themselves but they added up, they helped to create less isolation, more goodwill.

Now the social pressure works in the opposite direction. Now when you are in line and the person next to you is tucked into something on their phone, you feel like it would be interrupting them, disturbing them to have an exchange. “Hey would you mind taking out your earbuds so I can make a trivial comment about the weather.” If you are under 25 you have never known anything different. I notice it even in myself. I’ll be just trying to get through the line, in a hurry, and someone will want to engage and I’ll think, “Really? We’re gonna do this? Dude, I’m super busy. I am so backed up on unwatched episodes. I thought the rules are you stay in your little world, and I stay in my little world and were miserable together.” And then I think, “My God who am I becoming?”

I was recently telling this to a group of people and this very wise person in this community said, “Well, yes, there are these internal and external forces that go against human connection. But here is my practice.” She said, “I volunteer at a hospital and I’ve decided that part of my

volunteer work is interacting with people not just on the hospital floor but from the time I leave my car. And when I am in the

elevator with another person, I will turn to them and I will ask this one question: “How is your day doing?” And sometimes there’s just a quick polite response, But sometimes we will have the most amazing exchange. Maybe it lasts 20 seconds. Maybe a minute. But that one question can open something in them and it can open something in me.”

Lay down your life for others, Jesus says. This is big and serious. Some of us may be feeling a tug for really important life-altering sacrifices. But some of us may be called to start smaller, right where we are. Laying down your life might be laying down your phone and looking around. Laying down your life might mean laying down your pride and wading into some discomfort, some inconvenience. Laying down your life might mean laying down your agenda and all the oh-so-important stuff you just have to get done, so you can talk to someone. Laying down your life might be as simple as laying down a curious, open-ended question to a stranger: “How is your day going today?”

Life with a capital L, the full, abundant Life that Jesus talks about takes focus, practice, intention. But we are not alone. The Living Christ under us, around us, and in us. The Holy One who longs to expand our lives now and for evermore. How will you lay down your life today?