

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

When Jesus first said to his followers that they might lose their lives, he was not exaggerating. Following Jesus in the first and second centuries meant risking everything. Early Christians were thrown out of Synagogues, ostracized by their communities, arrested by their government, and executed by the Empire for their faith. To follow Jesus is to risk everything. Those who find their lives will lose them; those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake will find them.

We have little frame of reference for such persecution. Because of the protections of the first amendment we in this country have the freedom to worship without fear of persecution. We do not really know what it is like to risk our lives to follow Jesus because we've never had to.

But we don't need to be persecuted in order to learn what it means to lose our lives and find them again in Jesus. For American Christians, many of us consider our faith a private thing, something between me and Jesus, and maybe my pastor, and maybe my church; but that's typically where we draw the line. In order to find out what it means to lose our lives for Jesus' sake, I suspect we need only start living our faith in public.

When Jesus says that those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake will find it, he's talking about evangelism, mission, the act of being public about your faith. Matthew chapter 10, from which our reading comes, is Jesus' long speech about evangelism. And here, toward the end, he gives his disciples two options: you can be private about your faith or public, you can find your life or lose it.

If I go down the first road, then I get to keep the life I've found. I can be private about my faith, be comfortable in my ways, cling to what I know, keep it to myself, and settle into complacency. And if I do that, I will spend my life having only ever focused on *my needs*, what *I want*, what's right *for me*. And, Jesus says, if I take that road, then I will eventually come to a place where I cannot recognize Jesus at all. In finding my life, I will completely destroy it.

If I go down the second road, then I lose my life. I risk everything; I am certain about nothing. I am uncomfortable as I step out into the unknown with only my faith as assurance that Jesus is with me. Down this road I wear my faith on my sleeve, I tell it in the light, proclaim it from the rooftops, as Jesus says, fully aware that doing so might cost me everything. And yet, Jesus says, down this road is new life.

The current conflict surrounding race in America is the most relevant example of finding and losing one's life that I know. At Wednesday night check-in two weeks ago, we talked a little bit about how challenging it is to talk about racism in America. One person remarked that the conversation is made more difficult by the fact that there are very few people of color in the Beaver community, if any. However, while it may be true that there is little racial diversity here, *racism* is alive and well here, just as it is around the country, and we *need* to talk about it.

A few days ago, a friend of mine was grocery shopping at L&L, where, she told me, she overheard a man say to his wife, “things will get better when they start shooting all the [people of color]”; only instead of saying “people of color,” he used a racial slur that has been used for hundreds of years to dehumanize God’s beloved black and brown children, a word that I cannot bring myself to repeat.

“Things will get better” he said, “when they start shooting all the...”

What would you do in this situation? How might we respond to this man?

I see two options. We could keep silent, write this off as an isolated incident, say that this guy is racist, shake our heads, and ignore it. And if we do so, we participate in the act of finding our own lives. Alternatively, we could speak up, confront him, and realize that these sorts of racist comments are voiced by millions of people daily and left unexpressed within the hearts of the rest of us. If we do so, we risk losing our lives, and we do so for Jesus’ sake.

In Matthew 25, Jesus says that whatever we do to “the least of these” we do to Jesus (25:31-46). If we speak up in defense of the oppressed, we speak up in defense of Jesus. And if we turn away and remain silent about the suffering of the oppressed, then, in effect, we turn away from Jesus. Everything we do to our neighbors, we do to Jesus; therefore, everything we do is either an act of finding our lives or losing our lives.

I’m proud of my friend because she spoke out; she gave that man a chance to reconsider his words, yet sadly he stood by them. But in speaking out my friend stood up for people of color and stood up for Jesus; she took the first steps toward losing her own life and finding a new one in Christ.

Talking about racism is hard. Believe me, I get it. No one wants to admit that they’re racist. No one wants to call out another person on their racism. We would rather ignore it all and hope that it goes away. That, by the way, is the very definition of white privilege. As white folks, we have the privilege of ignoring racism because it does not impact us adversely; in some cases, we may even benefit from it.

But ignoring racism, Jesus says, or staying silent when we encounter racism, is the same thing as keeping your life. We ignore racism because we are afraid of what acknowledging it might mean; we’re afraid that we might find out that we are actually guilty of racism and therefore need to change. Changing our thoughts, behaviors, and ways of life can be so, so challenging, and uncomfortable, and, frankly, terrifying. So often we’d rather live what we know, however bad it may be, than step out into the unknown. So we cling to our lives, keeping them at all costs.

Losing your life, in this situation, means forfeiting your comfort. It means being public about your faith. It means leaving the comfort of silence for the discomfort of a hard conversation. It means calling out people in the aisle at L&L for their racist remarks. It means taking the time to

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read books or watch movies that explore the present evils of racism. It means attending a Black Lives Matter protest and actively listening with an open mind to the stories black people tell. It means acknowledging that something is wrong and committing yourself to be a positive and vocal actor for change.

Jesus tells us that loving our neighbor can be divisive; the civil rights movement and its modern-day equivalent show us that. When we follow Jesus, we might lose things. Speaking out may cost you dearly; you might get hurt; you might lose friends; your family might become divided. But, Jesus promises, if we lose the life we had for his sake, for the sake of the gospel, for the sake our neighbors, for the sake of God's justice, then we will find another life, a deeper, more meaningful life, in him.

As followers of Jesus we have a responsibility to speak up and show up when God's children are not being loved as God loves them; right now, our black brothers and sisters are not being loved as God loves them. A couple minutes ago I mentioned that we can worship in this country without fear of persecution, but actually that's a good example of my white privilege; because that statement is not quite accurate. On Wednesday we commemorated the fifth anniversary of the Emmanuel 9 shootings. Five years ago, a self-proclaimed white supremacist and member of the ELCA walked into an African Methodist Episcopal church. He chose this church because it is famous for its role in the civil rights movement. He took a seat in the church and participated in a Bible study. At the end, he pulled out a gun and killed nine people right there in the church, all of them black children of God.

Now we may not have pulled the trigger, but we all participate in a system that produced this man and allowed him to do what he did. He grew up in the ELCA and yet somehow it seems that his racist beliefs were never adequately challenged by his church, by our church. The time has passed for us to cling to our old lives, my friends. It is time to put our lives on the line and speak out about the injustices of racism in this country.

Fear is a clear and present evil, and risking everything for Jesus is scary. Given the option between keeping our present life and risking it all for a new one in Jesus, most of us would take the first option. I know I would; I know I have. But this is why our faith is *critical*. When we step out into the unknown, when we risk losing our lives for Jesus' sake, we do so with the faith that Jesus is with us as we go. We cling to the promises found in Jesus' death and resurrection, that though we may die to our old lives and our old selves, we will be resurrected into a new life and a new self.

God calls us to lose our lives and so in faith we let them go, and we trust that God is leading us into a deeper, more meaningful, more graceful, more compassionate, more just existence.

So go and lose your life, that in Christ you might find it again.

Amen.