

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
September 3, 2023

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

There's a great bit in a sitcom from a few years ago, where the main character—a businessman, workaholic, tycoon type—has a health scare, and as he is lying there on the hospital bed in the Emergency Room, he turns to his loved ones as says, “I wish I would have worked more.”

The joke is funny, of course, because we are expecting some kind of deathbed conversion and a conversation about regret for missed time with family or vacations cut short by the rigors of work life. We all know at some level that we probably work too much in our culture, and that's what this joke is lampooning.

I will admit to feeling this pretty keenly as I stand here in the middle of my middle age. Every stage in life seems to have its own project from teens and twenties to thirties, all the way up to the end of our life. There are things we are asked to think about by our time in life, and, for me anyway, I notice that I'm wondering a lot about what makes a good life and how do we live it. When I was younger, I was so focused on getting an education, finding a partner, finding the right job—all sort of in a frenzy—that I mostly moved from one project to another in a rush. And now, I find myself slowly looking around and wondering about what is most important knowing that, god willing, half of my life has now gone by.

I wouldn't say that American culture is typically very good at inviting self-examination, but perhaps the church can act as an antidote. Perhaps the church can be the one who invites us to stop, to think, and to examine this one, short life that we are given. Maybe these beautiful stained glass windows aren't windows at all; maybe they are mirrors inviting us to pause, to take stock, and to reflect.

Jesus is asking for nothing less than for us to give up our lives in today's Gospel. These are bracing words, and I'm sure the disciples thought so as well. Who is this teacher Jesus who is preaching a death to the self at a time when the Roman empire was preaching a worship of power and might and riches? I imagine the disciples were as confused then and I am now. I find myself wondering what exactly is this life that I am supposed to give up? Is my life my work? Is it my family? Is it my education? Is it my mortgage rate? What exactly is my life?

I think maybe we have two lives—one constructed and one essential. My constructed life is all the stuff that I create, filled with status and expectation and a fair amount of artifice. Constructed life is the stuff on magazine covers and Instagram posts with filtered pictures of people on the beach and perfect families sitting down to a meal. The constructed life is the one that, on one hand, is false, and on another hand is the one that I present to the world—and maybe you too.

The essential life, of course, is the life lived in the secure knowledge of your heritage as a child of God. The essential life is a life of worthiness before God's throne. It's the cross on your forehead at baptism; it's the forgiven sins. It's the grace that we feel knowing that we are never able to be separated from the love of God.

I think that Jesus is telling us that for us to really live, we must lose the constructed life. The life that is not quite real.

So many of the wisdom traditions of the world require a time of deprivation—be that a spirit quest in the woods, or Jesus wandering in the wilderness, or fasting for Ramadan, or even the monastic vows of poverty. Cultures around the world and throughout time have recognized that it takes quite a lot for us to shed the constructed life, to drill down through the ego to find what is essential, what is divine.

I will admit that this project does not appeal to me. And I will also admit that these words of Jesus make me cringe. For me to save my life, I need to lose it? This is not a great marketing tagline for Christianity. And yet, it probably is the only way to proceed. All of those identities that are not true need to die. All of those insecurities and expectations and deadlines and purchases? Those need to die. They are not you and never have been. There will be a day when we find ourselves kneeling before the throne of God, and in that moment, none of those identities that we spend so much time attending to will mean much of anything. And so, in preparation, Jesus is telling us that to live, to really live while we are here on this earth, we have to clean house. We have to scrape all the nonsense off of our psyches like barnacles being scraped off the bottom of a ship. It's a painful process. And it requires a bit of loss. Who am I if I am not my bank account? Who am I if I am not my occupation? Who am I if I am not my country? Or my skin color?

Who you are is beloved. That's all. Just a creature made for the joy and glory of God. Just a soul loved beyond all sense and reason. Just a fragment of grace placed on this rock for a second. And the more time we spend trying to drill down through the muck to get to that truth, the better our lives will be.

So, I am afraid to report that we must lose our lives just like Jesus said. But in God's world, to lose that constructed life is to gain the perfect freedom that comes from knowing that you are God's beloved, first, last, and always. Amen.