

Jeremiah 20:7-13
Psalm 86:1-10
Romans 6:1-11
Matthew 10:24-39

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THE NEWNESS OF LIFE

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Summary: He who loses his life for my sake will find it.

Many of you are aware of the fact that the Gospel of Matthew is a very well-organized piece of writing. For example, the Gospel is organized around five particular sections, in each of which you find what appears to be a long discourse, and then in between these five great discourses, you have a narrative of events that Jesus participated in, miracles and so forth.

In each of these five great speeches that provide the architecture for his Gospel, what Matthew, writing several decades after the death of Jesus, seems to have done is to go through all the various things that His Lord is recorded to have said, and selected out those which seem to have the same topic, roughly speaking, and then to record them in his gospel as if they were a single long speech.

The result is that each of these five great discourse sections has a recognizable theme or topic. The first and greatest of these five sections is what we have come to call the Sermon on the Mount, which runs from chapter 5 through chapter 7 of Matthew's gospel, and it contains basically the practical ethical instructions for the Christian life: be kind, be merciful and forgiving, turn the other cheek, pray and do your good works without fuss or self-publicity, and so on and so on.

The second of these five great discourses is found in chapter ten. And this discourse has over time come to be referred to as the Missionary Discourse, because it essentially consists of a series of instructions and warnings and promises that Jesus at various times would have offered specifically to his disciples, to those who would be carrying the good news of salvation out into the world after Jesus had departed from it. Or in other words, his instruction as to what they could

expect as his missionaries or ambassadors; and hence informal title: the Missionary Discourse.

The lectionary selection for today consists of approximately half of that collection of instructions. Let me go ahead and read it now, and as I do so, you'll be able to appreciate, as Matthew certainly did, why these particular quotations from Jesus – which are themselves probably short summations or reminders of much longer instructions – why they belong together:

Matthew 10: 24-39.

As I said, these particular quotations are probably not the full instruction that Jesus provided, but they are still sufficient to give us a general sense of the nature and drift of that instruction. Part of it consists in warnings about what to expect, as when he tells them they may expect to be treated no less harshly than he himself has been and will be treated, and that they will be in serious bodily danger; but that is accompanied by the instruction that they must nonetheless continue to be bold and public in preaching the gospel, that they must persist even when the consequences to the existing social order seem divisive or even destructive, even if it requires the sacrifice of the affection and regard of those nearest and dearest, even when it results in the pain and humiliation and apparent defeat of the Cross; and all those hard instructions are themselves accompanied by the assurance that, despite all that, they remain under the loving protection and care of God, and that their efforts and boldness will win them recognition and recompense in the eternal unfolding of God's guidance and providence, a promise that reaches its culmination in the profound and yet enigmatic assurance that concludes our reading: *He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses His life for my sake will find it.*

These are hard and yet inspiring statements, brutally honest while yet tenderly encouraging. But it is important in reading them to remember that they were offered to a particular small group of individuals in a particular historical context, individuals being tasked and prepared to face the first battles, engage the first enemies, confront the initial obstacles in what would seem an impossible, nigh insurmountable challenge to establish a beachhead, and then spread outward to change the entire world, and liberate it from its old and established spiritual tyrannies, its blindness to God's truth, we may even say from its demonic possession.

We ourselves do not live in that world, nor can we even begin to appreciate what the reality of that historical context must have been like. We are all of us blessed to have been born into a time and place that has in untold ways been created and

shaped by those heroes of a distant age, a distant place, and the generations of heroes and saints and Christians who are the products of their efforts and sacrifices. We were born into a civilization that is in its deep structure the creation of their work. With the 4th of July almost upon us, we must always acknowledge our great good fortune in being citizens of a country that, for all its faults and misjudgments and moral shortcomings, was nonetheless founded on the principles of Christian truth and Christian aspirations, and which still reveres those truths and aspirations, even when, increasingly these days, they are attributed, not to God and Christ, but to our own invention. Every city, town, village and hamlet of our great country has churches where we can go to hear about God and Christ, and share our faith with one another. Perhaps most wonderful of all, each one of us has ready access to the very Word of God, both its full revelation in the New Testament and the historical preparation for that revelation in the records of the Old Testament.

But having said all that, when we return to the words of loving instruction that Jesus provided to those first disciples, we must always remember that those words were themselves the words of God, and God's words, whatever their historical context, always have application at some level to our own lives. Our responsibility is not to try to put ourselves into the shoes of those who first heard those words addressed to themselves, but to find the meaning of those words when applied to who we are, where we are, when we are.

And what stands out for me this morning are the words of Christ that Matthew quotes in closing the passage we read today. Let me remind you of them again:

He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

As Christians, as followers of Christ, we are asked to do one thing, and without doing that one thing, we remain forever as spiritual babes in Christ. What is that one thing? It is to give up our lives.

Returning to our remembrance of the great land of freedom and opportunity into which we were all blessed to have been born, we remember that those individuals who gathered at Independence Hall in Philadelphia to cobble together a Declaration of Independence were in a sense crucifying the lives they had all known in the firm and faithful expectation of a new and better life, one organized around the idea of personal liberty, civic responsibility, and most important of all, in the infinite value of every individual under God. Did they lose their old lives? Yes, they did. But what they gained was something new, something far, far better. What they gained was citizenship in a new and enduring political association based, not on fear and subjection, but on liberty and independence.

A couple of weeks ago, we reflected on how Matthew himself, on a fateful day almost two thousand years ago, stood up from his tax collector's table, and stepped into a new and glorious life in fellowship and under the guidance of Jesus.

We are not tasked with Matthew's task. But we are tasked with following his example in bringing under scrutiny our own lives, and of setting aside and leaving behind the elements of our lives that run contrary to the great body of our Lord's instruction. We are tasked with turning away from pride, with setting aside the false idols of single-minded materialism and seductive public acclaim, with tending to the poor and downtrodden and helpless, with ridding our own lives of hypocrisy and ostentation and the spirit of unforgiveness.

Is that an easy job? Well, the hard truth is that it is harder for some than others. For a self-centered, greedy, arrogant hypocrite like myself, it's a monumental challenge and a daily grind. For others of a sweeter and more naturally Christian disposition, the assignment is less intimidating. But for all of us, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, with whatever personalities and personal histories we have, under God's providence, been endowed, the task remains the same.

But for all of us, we have the blessed assurance that what awaits all of us, when we honestly and sincerely make the efforts, is something better, something stronger, something cleaner, and best of all, something eternal.

For all of us, we have the blessed assurance that Paul expressed in his letter to the Romans that we already heard today. So let me close by reading again those lovely and encouraging words:

6:3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

6:4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life.

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, is that we might be enlightened to recognize our own failings, emboldened to turn from them and set out on a new journey of voyage of self-discovery, heartened by the example of those heroic Christians who have ventured on their own paths of obedience before us, and strengthened in our daily resolve, we ask for these things in the name of our Lord and savior and guide, Jesus Christ.