
How to Gain Your Life by Losing It

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 17 – Year A

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many of us here at the Cathedral today know that I teach our Bible Greek class here at the Cathedral. And it happens that the text we finished translating before our summer break has an interesting connection to the scriptures we just heard a few minutes ago. But it's also interesting to notice how I got into all this Greek stuff in the first place. It started with my name, my first name that my father gave me. It's a Bible name with Greek origins and I suppose I had to learn Greek just to be able to understand it.

Here in the Bible Belt of the U.S. we southerners like to give our children biblical names. But maybe Dad went a bit overboard. First of all just pronouncing it was a challenge, so my third grade classmates shortened it to 'Thee.' Do me a favor though if you try to say more than that. It's not pronounced THEE-a-fuss as some are inclined to say, but rather thee-AH-fuss the way Dad said it. And he got it right, too, as a Morehouse College man, because 'Theophus' is a shortened form of the Greek name 'Theophilus.' You can find it there in the beginning of Luke's gospel and the beginning of the Book of Acts.

It's also interesting that the other people that I've come across with either version of that name—and it's not a big number as you can imagine—most of us are African American. So here I stand before you, an African American obsessed with Bible Greek at an Episcopal church located in the deep South of these United States. Go figure!

Well this year in our Cathedral Greek class we translated a non-biblical gospel called the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. It's non-biblical because it's part of the Apocrypha; one of those early Christian writings about Jesus that was not granted authoritative status. It's not like the four gospels of our present New Testament: the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Instead, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is a fanciful collection of stories that circulated in the early church about the boy Jesus between his ages of 5 and 12.

Just like us, the early Christians were curious about what it must have been like for the boy to grow up and become the person we now know and revere. So they tried to fill in the gap-years that our Bible stories leave blank: the years between Jesus' birth and his appearance as that 12-year-old boy in Matthew's story about him teaching the elders in the temple (Matthew 2; Luke 2:1–40, 41–52). But the stories in this *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* are fantastic—like Super Boy stories. They portray Jesus as a child first discovering his powers as a miracle worker and abusing those powers. That's right! So I must warn you in advance that you should prepare yourself to be scandalized. The boy Jesus that we see here can be erratic and alarming, ill-tempered and unpredictable. But he can also be compassionate and endearing.

His first miracle as a 5 year-old involves gathering and purifying water at a polluted stream. He also makes 12 clay sparrows and turns them into live birds that fly away. However just like the adult Jesus in our gospels he does all this on a Sabbath day. The villagers are scandalized and report this to his father, Joseph. So he's already emerging as a child who is precocious, mischievous, and needing more discipline or supervision. And already he pits himself against a local scribe, whose little son disrupts the containment of water that Jesus had miraculously purified. This tampering with his miracle

upsets the prideful boy Jesus. In reaction he gets irritated and strikes the boy lame.

Now I warned you in advance. That kind of tantrum leads to a similar episode when another boy accidentally bumps into him. In this more shocking case the boy Jesus responds by striking the other boy dead. And when his father, Joseph, protests this behavior, Jesus does not apologize. On the contrary, he proceeds next to curse those villagers who had earlier accused him of performing his miracles on the Sabbath; he curses them by striking them blind.

But in the next episodes we see a different character begin to emerge. One of Jesus' childhood friends falls from a window and dies. Based on his previous behavior people accuse the young Jesus of pushing his friend out of the window. To prove his innocence Jesus then raises the boy from the dead. After that he exercises compassion by healing a man whose foot had been wounded with an axe.

From then on we begin to see a 6-year-old Jesus, a year older, acting more characteristically in the way we expect. And toward the end of the gospel Jesus has become much more benign and performs a series of completely compassionate miracles. When his older brother James is gathering wood a snake bites his hand, and Jesus heals him by breathing on the wound. In subsequent episodes he raises more people from the dead; first a baby and then a construction worker.

(Rick Brannan (2013). *Greek Apocryphal Gospels, Fragments and Agrapha: Texts and Transcriptions*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.)

Finally the gospel ends by retelling the story of the 12-year-old Jesus at the Jerusalem temple during Passover (cf. Luke 2:41–52). You may recall how that story ends, famously with the following verses as found in Luke's gospel:

“Then he went down with [his parents] and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them . . .

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” (Luke 2:51-52)

Those verses provide a sharp contrast to Jesus' imagined childhood as found in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Now we can appreciate what it may have meant to our Christian ancestors to say that the boy Jesus “was obedient” to his parents, and that he “increased” not only “in wisdom and in years,” but also “in divine and human favor.” And we can also appreciate that their concerns are also our concerns. Instead of being arrogant and self-centered—and therefore outside of “human favor”—how did this boy become the man we know and revere. The answer that might have satisfied the earliest Christians is that he must have struggled like any boy would; that is, any boy who grew up discovering that he had miraculous and supernatural powers at his command.

What would enable such an ego-driven boy to become the kind of mature, self-giving personality, and Prince of Peace that is acknowledged and revered in *our* Bible stories, and in our beliefs and piety? One answer suggested by reading today's gospel is that Jesus had to learn; had to practice, practice, practice—practice the Way of the Cross that he prescribes for you and me in today's key verses:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25).

How did Jesus arrive at that wisdom? Our apocryphal tradition suggests that he did not come full-blown into the world knowing it. In our non-biblical text he had to learn the Way of the Cross that he charted in advance for you and me as his followers. But in a more biblical text this is the way that the Letter to the Hebrews puts it:

“Although he was a Son [of God], he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him . . .” (Hebrews 5:8-9)

Church family and friends, where and what are we suffering that provides such rich opportunities for you and me to learn obedience through the Way of the Cross? What is the Way of the Cross by which we are being “made perfect” or—more literally—being completed to fulfill our life's calling destiny as our Lord completed his?

Well, here are the opportunities prescribed for us by the apostle Paul in today's reading from Romans:

Practice the Way of the Cross by “letting love be genuine, by hating what is evil through holding fast to what is

good.”

Practice the Way of the Cross by “loving one another with mutual affection, by outdoing one another in showing honor.”

Practice the Way of the Cross by “blessing those who persecute us; blessing not cursing them.”

And practice the Way of the Cross by “not repaying anyone evil for evil, but taking thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”

That’s right, Paul concludes: “If it is possible, so far as it depends on us, live peaceably with all, never avenging ourselves, but leaving room for God. If our enemies are hungry or thirsty, nourish them. And thus let us not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:17-21).

And so let us genuinely practice this Way of the Cross. Let us practice losing our lives the way Jesus himself likely learned in his youth, so that he was empowered to complete his mature self-giving on the Cross. In order to complete our calling and destiny as Jesus completed his, let us likewise lose our life in order to find and regain it. And so let us gain what Jesus promised; the promise of having a life that is truly worth living.

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.