
Needed: More Losers

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 19, Year B

The problem with this church is that it doesn't have enough losers! So said a former parishioner of mine some years ago. We were in a meeting where we were discussing the strengths and weaknesses of our congregation. Most people listed the sorts of things you'd expect to hear about a large, vibrant, well resourced church: excellent programming, beautiful worship, lots of activities for children and youth, never enough parking, etc., etc. The conversation droned on with few, if any, surprises, until suddenly there came a voice from the back of the room: *The problem with this church is that it doesn't have enough losers.*

I've been thinking about this comment in the context of today's gospel lesson, which, as you probably noticed, is a real doozy:

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, '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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?'

These words hit hard, really hard. They hit right smack dab in the middle of all the clinging and climbing and clutching and striving we humans do—our preoccupation with our net worth, our safety, our social standing; our furtive glances over our shoulders to see how we, or our children or grandchildren are measuring up against others; our attempts to control and manipulate our relationships, our property values, our social media presence, our professional accomplishments. *Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.* These are terrifying words, really, for they suggest that Christianity is a religion for losers. That is to say, Christianity is a religion not for people who are into acquisition, achievement, protection, and possession, but for people who are into letting go.

This morning's gospel lesson confronts us all with two simple questions: *Do you have a life? If not, then how are you going to die in order to get one?* These are tough questions in a world that likes to pretend that death and pain and loss are somehow optional parts of the human experience, things that can be artfully avoided. Author and physician Rachel Remen writes of a tradition her mother brought to the United States from her native Russia many years ago. The tradition involved sewing small red ribbons into the clothing of family members. The belief was that these ribbons could ward off evil, shielding those who wore them from pain and distress. Remen's mother was so determined to protect her family that she took this custom to the extreme. She not only sewed red ribbons into their clothing, she also put them in their hand bags, their backpacks, their shoes, their books, indeed, all over their house. Reflecting on this, Remen notes that, even as a young child, she found her mother's practice to be fear based and stifling. It may have scared off a few evil spirits, but it also robbed her of a lot of hope, joy, and peace. It robbed her of a lot of life.

I suspect most of us are consummate red ribbons sewers. Like that Russian mother, we place ribbons all around us trying to ward off death, failure, and suffering. We do this in the way we spend our money, in the way we use our time, in the way we think about those who are different from us, in the way we hold on so tightly to the things we're sure we know, in the way we suppose the only possibility for our child's happiness is to attend a certain type of college, in the way we ourselves jockey for position on the ladder of success. Jesus offers an alternative for those who are weary of this endless, and often joyless, quest for security, certainty, and control. Give yourself away, he says. Give yourself away. Let go of the death grip you have on your life and give yourself away, trusting that God is strong enough to hold you even if you find yourself in free fall.

There's a popular Internet joke that's been making the rounds for several years now. It features church bulletin bloopers. One of them, an announcement about a stress relief group reads, "Don't let stress kill you; let the Church help!" We may laugh, but I think this really is one of the Church's greatest callings—to be a community where we can help each other learn how to die. I'm not just talking about actual physical death. Parishioner Susan Patterson is leading a wonderful class right now called "Going there: Contemplating Death to Invigorate Life," and I commend it to you. But I'm not just talking about actual physical death, I'm talking about other kinds of death as well.

This past spring, I was invited to take part in something called the Cost of Poverty Experience. It was an event designed to increase awareness about the lives of our neighbors in need. Each of us taking part in this experience was put into an imaginary "family" and given the next hour to try to pay all the family's bills and keep a roof over our heads and food on the table. I got assigned the role of a widowed father out of work due to chronic illness with two teenage daughters to care for. I did pretty well for a while—I applied for disability and received food from a local pantry; I sold some things to a pawn shop and got a loan from my brother-in-law to pay my utility bill. I did pretty well until near the end of the month, when one of my daughters came home from school in tears because she wasn't going to be able to be a cheerleader. We couldn't afford the uniform. As I was processing this news, my other daughter randomly asked if we could go to Starbucks for a frappuccino. It had been so long since we'd had a treat.

Right then and there, something in me began to die. It was the part of me that had been so certain I had easy answers to other people's problems (hint: Don't waste money you don't have on Starbucks). Suddenly, this part of me was not quite so sure. This part of me was not quite so ready to judge and to condemn and to assess. This part of me began to die. It hasn't died completely, I can assure you, but it started to erode just a tiny bit on that day. And this was life giving. It was freeing!

We're going to be hosting a Cost of Poverty Experience here at the cathedral in mid-October. I hope you'll consider taking part. More than that, though, I hope you'll ask yourself where in your own life God longs to set you free. Where the loss of something you're fairly sure you can't get along without might end up making space for something more holy and hopeful than you could ever have imagined.

Such a loss may feel like death. For instance, when letting go of the temptation to blame those with different politics than your own for all social ills—when letting go of this temptation forces you to examine your own role in perpetuating cycles of poverty and oppression. When breaking free of some of your tribalism to get to know—really know—someone from a completely different background—when this feels like a challenge to the identity you've worked so hard to establish and maintain. Such a loss may feel like death, and that's okay. That's okay. We have a Savior, after all, who specializes in resurrection. Amen.