

Sixth Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 7, June 22 2008 Year “A”
Genesis 21:8-21, Psalm 86:1-10,16-17, Romans 6:1-11, Matthew 10:24-39
Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Seamus P. Doyle

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

There was a time in the Church when it was considered that those who left family and home to go to the foreign missions were in fact living out this statement of Jesus. They were going to preach the Good News at the risk of losing their life. And there were those who thought that this was the greatest sacrifice one could make.

While it may be admirable to take a chance on one's life to go and preach the Good News to the ends of the earth, it's difficult to say that this is exactly what Jesus had in mind, even while he admitted he was sending his disciples out as sheep among wolves.

To lose one's life for the sake of the Kingdom of God is precisely what the Kingdom of God is all about. Jesus put it this way: *Seek you first the kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you.* In other words, in keeping with the parables of the kingdom of God, it is safe to say that the kingdom of God is an inward journey to find the person created in the image and likeness of God. This is who we have to find in order to preach by word and example the Good News of the Kingdom. We do not have to be perfect in our preaching or living out of the Good News but we do have to be working toward it and at no time in our earthly journey will we arrive at perfection. This is the journey to both find ourselves and lose ourselves for the sake of the Kingdom.

In finding ourselves we discover those qualities that we so readily attribute to the divine: God is loving, God is compassionate, God is kind,

God is merciful; God is patience, God is gentle, God is sensitive, God is generous, God is good. These and many more attributes we readily acknowledge belong to God. The sad fact is that the majority of humans while professing that they are created in the image and likeness of God do not want to believe that they are compassionate, kind, gentle, good, generous, patient etc. More often than not we hear the statements, "I have little to no patience." "I am not generous" "I am not merciful" "I am not kind." Or we prefer to minimize by stating, "I am not that patient, that kind, that generous," etc.

By doing this we begin to define ourselves by our behavior and not the spiritual gifts with which we were created. Negative emotions contribute to the martyrdom of the goodness that is within us. We effectively kill the goodness that is within us by denying that we are in fact good, kind, compassionate, merciful, generous, people. This is what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God. What we do to kill this is to talk about ourselves in terms of our human behavior: "I am impatient." "I couldn't care less." "I am indifferent." The reality is we have patience, we do care; we are not indifferent but we have buried these attributes within us and its only in certain places that this goodness appears and then disappears in the presence of those from whom we want to protect ourselves emotionally.

Jesus said, *A servant is not above his teacher.* Jesus did not ask his disciples to do anything he would not do and, by extension, we are not being asked to do anything more or anything less than Jesus was asking of himself. Culturally he had to die to self to do the things he did. In the time of Jesus Jews would not touch a leper; talk to a Samaritan woman particularly at

noon at a well when she was not escorted by other women. No self-respecting rabbi would associate with tax collectors or people who did not keep the law as it was meant to be kept. Jesus broke the Sabbath laws and eating regulations to drive home the point that the person is more important than the law.

Jesus was driving home another point; the importance of the individual and the person's self worth. *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. and even the hairs of your head are numbered. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

There are individuals who attend church on a regular basis whose self worth is lower than the mud on the bottom of the sea. They walk around holding on to the surface of reality like veneer on a table; afraid it will one day peel off or, worse still, that someone already knows its only veneer. Because they do not feel good about themselves, they compensate through a variety of activities, which may be creative and useful to the community, but it still keeps them locked behind the veneer of who they really are.

What Jesus is asking of us is not easy and simultaneously, when practiced, it is very simple. Those who begin to find themselves will discover that in order to live they have to lose themselves and consequently find themselves in opposition to family members. As Jesus *said I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in law against her mother in law and one's foes will be members of one's household.*

Those who find themselves and come to grips with the reality that the kingdom of God calls on them to live a life that is different from the culture around them soon discover that they will be encouraged to "take it easy" "Don't change every thing at once," "This is the way we have always done it here." "Don't rock the boat and you will get more things accomplished."

What if Mary had said to the Angel Gabriel, "You know, this is not a good time for me to be pregnant!" What if Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah, other Prophets had said, "Maybe we ought to wait a few years before we say anything?" "What if Jesus had gone into the desert and then decided it would be easier for him to be a carpenter and let John the Baptist preach? What if Martin Luther had decided to give into the pressure of the Vatican and recanted? What if John Huss had recanted his belief that the People of God are really the Church and not a building? What if Gandhi had decided to stay in Africa and let his country figure out its own future? What if Mother Theresa had decided to stay in the safety of her convent instead of going into the streets of Calcutta?

These are prominent folk. Let's take a moment and think about the teachers, community individuals, people who are now recognized as "unsung heroes" who made a difference in the lives of their community by taking an unpopular stand in the name of Justice.

Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. These are difficult words to accept. Not all of us are going to take unpopular stands or stand up against our community. But all of us at one point or another can take a stand quietly and make a difference in the life of

another and in our own life. Not everything has to be in the public arena to make a difference.

Making a difference comes about when we look deep within ourselves and see that we are made in the image and likeness of God and then begin to let that light shine, however bright, in public or in private, and make a difference in the world around us.

Do not be afraid. Over and over, we hear this phrase throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and from the mouth of Jesus. It is as if God knows that as humans we are afraid, afraid to risk, afraid to speak out, afraid to speak the truth as we understand it.

If asked, most of us would say that we would not deny our faith. Yet in reality how many of us are comfortable saying grace before meals in public? How many of us are comfortable talking about our relationship with God? About our spiritual life? How respectfully do we speak about other religions?

Those who find their life lose it. They will discover that the kingdom of God is really within them and that what they considered important is really not that important. Those who *lose their life for the sake of the kingdom of God will find it* because they will realize that the only thing of real importance is the Kingdom of God and they will lose themselves in God and let God work through them. The prayer from the end of morning prayer becomes increasingly more meaningful and real: "Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen."