

Lost for God

Mark 10:23-31

The movie *Good Will Hunting* ends with the title character driving off into the sunset, driving cross country from Boston to California. Why? As the note he left his psychologist says, "I have to go see about a girl." Will leaves behind all he has: his past, with his childhood friends, a home, and a job that had served to insulate him from life; his future, with lucrative jobs in business or government. He leaves it all behind to drive across the country to a place he's never been, to try to reconnect with a girl who'd left him, a girl who might not take him back. But he thinks it's worth it.

The Bible is full of stories of people who leave behind everything they have to follow God's command. Abraham leaves his family and everything behind to go to a land where he has not been because God calls him to go. Paul gave up his ways as a Pharisee to follow Jesus and travel sharing that message. And of course, the disciples gave up everything as they followed Jesus.

In our Gospel lesson today, the disciples remind Jesus of all that they'd given up to follow him. After the rich young man had gone away, seemingly unwilling to sell all he had and give the proceeds to the poor to follow Jesus, Peter reminds Jesus that the disciples had done that. They'd given up their lives to follow Jesus. Peter, Andrew, James and John had left their families in the fishing boats to follow Jesus. Matthew left his tax collecting booth. The other disciples had left behind their friends, families, and jobs, too. With all they'd given up to follow Jesus, with all that they'd lost, surely that meant something, right?

Jesus reminds his disciples that many who will follow him will have to leave things behind, will lose things for God. They will have to leave house and brothers and sisters and parents and children and lands behind. But they will gain as well. They gained the gift of family. They became a living part of the committed company of God's very own, a community that is far above what they could ask for or think of. They received the gift of eternal life. They'd lost things for God, but they'd received more from God.

A few centuries ago, a young university student was returning home when he was caught in a strong thunderstorm. Scared for his life, he cried out to God for deliverance. When he survived the storm, his life

changed directions. Instead of heading towards a prosperous law career, the goal his education had prepared him for, he became a monk. And not just any monk, but he joined one of the strictest, most devout orders at the time. Like all other monks, he left behind his family, his friends, and all things familiar to him. He left behind his home, his possessions, his clothes, his money; all he had as he now devoted himself to God's servant as a monk. Needless to say, this made his family upset, especially his father, who had been hoping that having a lawyer in the family would bring them strongly into the middle class. Yet he gave all of that away; his educational and career goals, his family's hopes for him, and his future earnings. He lost it all for God.

Now, by now you've probably figured out I'm talking about Martin Luther. It's a familiar story, of how his life was redirected, and that redirection changed the world. But we often forget how much he gave up to become a monk. But more than that, what he lost was given back to him. He didn't become a lawyer, but he did become one of the most prolific and best-selling authors of his day. His education helped him debate scholars from all across Europe. His father eventually forgave him for leaving law school, but he gained a family of fellow monks and reformers, before marrying Katie, a former nun. His house was full of his own family and students who rented rooms. His rediscovery of the gift of grace allowed him to let go of the burden he carried that he needed to work hard enough to make himself right with God. He lost much for God, but he gained much, as well.

Jesus told his disciples they'd receive a hundredfold what they'd lost. But he also told them they'd be persecuted. The disciples would face even more challenges for following Jesus. They'd be arrested, tried, exiled, and killed for their faith. But in following Jesus, even if they lost their lives, they'd gain eternal life.

As Jesus talks with his disciples, he's on his way to Jerusalem. He knows what will happen there. He knows all that he will lose once there. He will lose his friends, as the disciples run away and abandon him. He will lose his trust in others, as he's betrayed by one of the twelve, one of his closest friends. He will lose his

independence and freedom. He will lose his very life. But that was the reason he came. That was the only way he would be able to give eternal life to the disciples, and to us, and to all who believe in him. Jesus had to lose everything so we could receive everything.

As Paul wrote to the Philippians, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Jesus for the joy set before him endured the cross. With the persecution comes purpose.

Our sermon hymn for today shows that. It was written by a Chinese pastor, who had helped bring Interservice Christian Fellowship to universities in China. But that was in the tumultuous 1940’s, and after the communists came to power, he and his family were eventually forced to flee to Hong Kong, then Singapore, and finally the United States. He lost his homeland to the communist government, yet he gained family throughout the world. He and his wife started a school to train Chinese students in the US, in the hopes they’d be able to return to China in a way foreign missionaries couldn’t.

Today, Christians throughout the world face persecution. China is working to require state recognized churches to display pictures of Chairman Mao alongside the cross, and to require preservice pro-communist songs to be sung before worship can begin. Russian Christians are restricted on how and where they can evangelize, and those who aren’t members of the Russian Orthodox Church face other challenges. Some of you may remember the Pakistani family who came here who talked about the challenges they face for being Christian in their home country. Christians in the Middle East still are in chaos, and have nowhere to go as the US takes in fewer and fewer refugees at all, and only a handful of persecuted Christians. Yet in the midst of persecution, as they lose things for God, they gain as well. Eternal life.

CS Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, writes about how losing things that get in the way help us gain more. “The more we get what we call “ourselves” out of the

way and let [Christ] take us over, the more truly ourselves we become. ...The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. ... Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.”

We gain by losing. We receive because of all Jesus lost for us. We receive life because Jesus lost his for us on the cross. What a wonderful promise. That’s a message we cannot lose.

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October 21, 2018