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| <i>Date Preached</i> | 30-Aug-2020 | <i>Date Initiated</i> | 17-Aug-2020 |
| <i>Where Preached</i> | SAK | <i>Appointed Readings</i> | Yr A, Pr 17 (Tr 2) |
| <i>Main Text</i> | | | |

" 'For those who want to **save** their life will lose it, and those who **lose** their life for my sake will find it.' "



A story of gain ... and loss. Last week, in the passage from St Matthew that immediately precedes today's, we heard Peter confess Jesus as the Messiah: the anointed of God, chosen and sent to be the deliverer of God's people. And we heard Jesus Peter that he, alone, will be the founder of the Church, Jesus' body on earth. And one way God could have written the story of Jesus would have been to end it right there, on the pinnacle of Peter's understanding and proclaiming that the agent of humanity's deliverance had now arrived among us. With Peter's having solved the divine riddle of God's existence in human form—Emmanuel, God With Us—God could have put down the pen and declared God's work finished. In that case, our Christian faith might be little more than worshipping Jesus as the über-king or the emperor of the universe. Nothing but upside—nothing but gain!

But this is emphatically *not* the way of God, which is not the way of royalty but the way of the Cross. For immediately after Peter's confession and appointment, Jesus launches, for the first time, into the prophesy of His ignominious death at the hands of the faithful. Peter—no doubt plunging from Jesus' highest praise into soul-shaking disbelief, as his entire conception of Who and What the "Messiah" is ... crumbles at Jesus' words—saying this simply *can't* be so. Jesus all but disowns Peter; verbally slaps him down and allies him, if only momentarily, with Satan, God's gravest enemy. In a moment ... in the briefest of exchanges ... Peter *loses*. He loses his bearings; he loses his sense of chosen-ness and privilege; he loses Jesus' warmth; maybe he even loses a bit of the very faith that brought him to his bold confession in the first place.

Peter's loss is emblematic of Jesus' life and our own lives in Him. Our Messiah is not a righter-of-all-wrongs or a guarantor of ease and comfort in this life. For look at the plan of salvation He announces: I will suffer and die for you; in my resurrection, I will procure eternal life for you; and, *in response*, you—presuming you wish to follow me—must be willing to lose everything you have, for My sake. I will, Jesus says, gain everything—the acme of existence—for you ... but that gain is not something for you to hold onto or protect. Having gained everything from Me, you are to go out and lavish it upon others: give without expecting anything in return ... care for others in proportion to their need, not their kindness ... serve without regard for self ... love and cherish as prodigally as I, Christ, love and cherish you, even at the cost of My own life. The gain Jesus procures for us also leads, inexorably, to *loss*.

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And so, we arrive at a prime conundrum of our faith. The more we love, the more we can be hurt. The more we care, the more vulnerable we leave ourselves. The more we serve or sacrifice, imitating Christ, the more pain we may endure. A hermetically sealed, self-contained life would be

cleaner, safer ... far less prone to suffering and loss ... but it is not the life Christ led or the life He calls us to. And so, notwithstanding our faith ... indeed, in seeming contradiction to the Good News we believe ... we endure extreme illness; grieve the deaths of dear friends, children and spouses; witness, helplessly and disbelievingly, tragic accidents, natural disasters and global pandemics. Sometimes we are even the victims of others' *intent* to hurt us: prejudice and discrimination; physical or verbal abuse; grossly unfair judgment of our work or our worth; active hatred or its sneakier cousin, passive neglect. We know Christ died to set us free, forever. So how are we to make sense of the bitter, painful, sometimes intractable losses that can beset us and threaten to destroy the hope Christ Himself is for us?

Importantly, there are several things I believe we must *not* do. One is to think that these losses are God's way of testing us. It is not in God's nature to test us. God loves, waits, coaxes and forgives, but God does not ever seek to *weaken* our faith. (For the same reason—only *more* so—it is wrong to think that calamities happen to us, either individually or collectively, because God is angry with us or seeking to punish us for our waywardness. We are the beloved of God, and God longs for us to draw closer; hurting us serves no end that God desires.) Another error, I believe, is to think that even if God does not *cause* the losses we endure in our lives, God *permits* them—fails to stop them from happening. Yes, God is omnipotent, but the 'bargain' God has made with us is not to violate the laws of nature or set aside the free exercise of human will—God 'goes with' the ways of this world. If this were not the case, we would soon come to approach God as some sort of magician who can make cancer disappear or put a new car in our driveway.

No, to resolve the dissonance between the shattering impact of the losses we suffer ... and the hope that is our faith ... we must look to the greatest loss of all: Jesus' death on the Cross. Some of the most poignant, direct, even conflicted words Jesus says to the Father are during the prayers leading up to the Crucifixion. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He asks, "Father, let this cup pass from me," praying so feverishly, according to St Luke, that He sweats blood. From the Cross He first cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"; and then: "Into your hands I commend My spirit." In these moments of unalloyed anguish ... of the fullest expression of the human-ness He shares with us ... Jesus draws even closer to the Father and places His life ... His entire being ... in the hands of God.

And this, I think, is the model for surviving our own losses, for withstanding our own suffering. At those times we find ourselves walking farther and farther into darkness and despair ... as our losses seem to be accumulating into giant heaps ... our anguished souls reach out to our Savior with greater and greater urgency and longing; our prayers grow more plangent. As our hope in this world fades and shreds, our hope in the One-Who-never-wavers renews and claws us back from the abyss ... and gains for us respite and renewal in the love of God. Exactly when we're on the brink of complete loss ... then—*then*—we come to the full and total gain of God.

That gain may not be a cure or a resolution or anything else that directly affects the *status quo* of our suffering or neatly offsets the losses we've experienced. But what we *do* gain is the strength of God to carry us onward; the peace of Christ to rest in; and the loving presence of the Holy Spirit in our every outward tear and inward cry. Far from being God's plan or desire for us, the losses we suffer are singular opportunities for us to place our life in God's hands and know God—in all God's power, love and grace—as we never have before. And that is a gain ... no loss in this world can ever diminish.



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