

Mark 8:27-38

Weekly Eucharist

September 9, 2009

Losing our Selves

Study hard while you're in college and you'll get a good job and be able to support yourself. Or study hard while you're in college and you'll get into a good graduate school or professional school, and then you'll get a good job and be able to support yourself and pay off the student loans from grad school. Wouldn't you say that being able to support yourself when you grow up is pretty important? Who of us wants to graduate from college and move back home?

We expect to stand on our own two feet when we get out of here and when we do that some other expectations will enter our horizons. We will have to buy a house because owning your own home is still the American dream. We will have to start our retirement nest egg—I know you can't imagine that, but you will retire some day and they say social security won't be here much longer. We will have to save for a rainy day, like a drop in real estate value or the collapse of Lehman Brothers—it's been raining a lot this year. You never know when you will need an extra few thousand dollars in the bank.

I don't think I'm telling you anything you don't already know. In fact, you could probably add to my list of maxims for self sufficiency and security. It's the norm for who we are: middle class Americans. Whether you're lower, middle, or upper middle class; I think we're all middle class. Bill and Melinda Gates' children aren't in Wesley yet; they're too young. So, we're mostly middle class and self sufficiency is our norm.

That's why it's so hard for us to figure out what Jesus meant when he said, "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." The more popular interpretations spiritualize life and determine that what Jesus is really talking about is heaven—when we all get to heaven, what a singing and rejoicing there will be. So, losing your life is about doing all the right

things to get to heaven. Only our theology teaches us that we can't do anything to get to heaven, to earn our place in heaven; it's all grace, pure gift, given to us through the generosity of God. All we have to do is accept it.

For those of us trained in self sufficiency, used to earning good grades, getting good jobs, having good lives, we have a really hard time NOT working for something. But as soon as we start to work for our salvation, we've lost it.

I think this may be one of the hardest doctrines of the Christian faith for us to wrap our minds around. Resurrection—piece of cake—we don't know how it happened, we just know it did. But salvation, that's tough stuff. “Those who want to save their life will lose it.”

Think of the ways we save our lives. The most seductive are probably money and power. The money part would fit with some of the things I said earlier about saving and investing; making sure we have enough to take care of ourselves. The power part comes through more discretely and manifests itself through dogmas like national security, war on terror, get tough on crime—forms of protection. The more money we have the more protection we can buy; money and power are always in collusion, so those tend to be the things we think we ought to save.

When Peter names Jesus the Messiah and then Jesus turns around and announces: “the Messiah, the Son of Man, must undergo great suffering, and be rejected,” we get a glimpse into the saving/losing scenario. For sure, Jesus could have saved his life; that was established in the opening scene of Mark's Gospel when Jesus and Satan duked it out in the desert. The disciples were ready that night in the Garden of Gethsemene; they had their swords out and Jesus said, “No more of this.” No more homeland security; no more war on terror; no more get tough on crime. Come on, Jesus, what's your defense? How do we save ourselves?

This is a crisis. Jesus presents us with a moment of decision, a crisis. Crisis doesn't just mean chaos and instability, though a moment of crisis can feel that way because we've got to make a choice. We cannot stay in the moment of crisis.

- Who do YOU say that I am? Decide right now
- You are the Messiah. Peter decided. So far, so good.
- The messiah must undergo great suffering and be rejected. The Messiah must lose...
- No Jesus, that won't work. We have to reclaim what is rightfully ours; we have to protect ourselves. We have to show them who's boss.
- You are setting your mind on human things, not divine things. If you want to follow me—focus. Those who want to save their life will lose it.

Decide: You don't have to follow Jesus; you get to chose. If you sit here and refuse to make a choice, then you have in effect decided not to follow him. There is no room in a crisis for indecision. Jesus is on the move, so to follow him, you've got to move. If that's what you chose to do. If not, that's OK, because that's what free will is all about—the freedom to say yes to the freedom that Jesus offers you.

If we choose to start moving, to follow Jesus, we don't know for sure what we'll lose. I currently own my own house and I save for retirement. I had the same class you did on self sufficiency and independence. But if I have to choose between Jesus and the house; I'll give up the house because in choosing to follow Jesus I have in fact already given up the house, the pension plan, even the health insurance—which these days is probably worth more than everything together. If we decide to follow Jesus, we lose our lives and we focus on divine things. If you want to know what divine things look like, then look at Jesus. Look at him right here in this moment, calling us to the freedom that only Jesus can offer, the freedom of losing our selves to save our lives. Amen.