

Again & Again: Gaining & Losing

*A sermon preached on Mark 8:31-38 on February 25, 2024,
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I.

In 1958, the communist government of China under Mao Zedong's leadership decided they'd had enough. The offender? Not another country, or a protest group, or a societal ill to correct. Rather, war was declared against the nation's sparrows, those little birds who flew around the countryside, eating up the precious seed grain, and being the "public animals of capitalism."

In order to eliminate the sparrows, a massive campaign of noise began to keep the birds perpetually in flight and exhausted. Citizens in cities banged on pots and pans, beat the drums, and set off fireworks. They found temporary refuge on the grounds of foreign embassies who wouldn't put up with the noisy mobs, but when the grounds were surrounded by a ceaseless parade of clamor, even those spaces over time weren't safe. Sparrows began to fall from the sky. As history tells us, workers at the Polish embassy had to use shovels to clear their land of dead sparrows. China declared victory, and not long after, sparrow numbers reached extinction levels.

But soon thereafter, citizens began to notice changes. The rice harvest that year drastically decreased, because the sparrows weren't there to eat the insects that liked to feed on the rice crops. Locusts swarmed the countryside and contributed to a terrible famine that killed tens of millions of citizens, because the sparrows weren't there to help control them. It got so bad, that the Chinese government finally relented and imported 250,000 sparrows from the Soviet Union in order to revive the population and set things right.¹

¹ I first read this story in Kate Bowler's *Good Enough: 40ish Devotionals for a Life of Imperfection*, p215-216. Here's another helpful piece for more context about this story:
<https://www.chino.k12.ca.us/cms/lib/CA01902308/Centricity/Domain/3696/D%20Sparrow.pdf>

How did they get it so confused?

For those who want to save some pennies will lose the harvest. Those who worship at the altar of a pest-free life will miss the forest for the trees. Those who want to gain the world will lose their soul.

II.

These were the types of words on Jesus's lips in today's Gospel reading, words about sacrifice and identity, words that have confounded his disciples then and through all the years since. But in order to more fully understand what Jesus is saying, we need to go back a few verses. Let me read for us again in Mark 8, starting with verse 27. *"Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him."*

"Who do you say that I am," Jesus asks Peter. Not "who am I," let's note, but "who do you think I am?" It's a startling question that reveals Peter's preferences, his beliefs, his wishes. "You are the Messiah," and it changes everything. Within the context of what we know about Peter, his unspoken but clear longing revealed what generations of Jews had yearned for – a Messiah, an anointed one, sent to defeat the Roman occupiers once and for all and put in their place the Davidic monarchy.² Like many since, Peter probably wished for Jesus to come with his cross upside down: a sword that is a solution to conquer and dominate in Jesus' name.³

² The SALT Project had, as always, good commentary on this text that I found most helpful in my preparation: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/20/cross-purposes-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-2>

³ From a sermon by George Mason, "The Third Way," *The Word Made Fresh: Preaching God's Love for Every Body*, p320.

It's no wonder that Peter scolded Jesus when he describes the suffering he'd soon undergo, the crucifixion he'd endure, the death he'd die. And after Peter struggled to hear him, the text says: "Jesus called the crowd with his disciples" – indicating that he was widening the circle to which he would teach – and began to lay truth after truth upon the masses: "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."

It's no wonder, too, that this call of Jesus has gotten lost in translation through all the years since, sometimes as poorly as trading sparrows for survival, other times as crudely as wishing for one savior and getting another. For as one writer says, "the cross that we choose to bear probably reveals who we think Jesus really is."⁴

III.

How do we confuse this call?

"Deny yourself" becomes "validate yourself" or "platform yourself."

Believe that you are the ultimate arbiter of truth. Think that your needs matter more than anyone else's, that your lenses are the truest and clearest. Convince yourself that you are self-made, that in your own mind and with your own resources and using your own skill, you have achieved it all. Overlook the foundation upon which your entire life is built: the parents whose DNA you bear, the teachers who opened your eyes, the siblings and friends who shaped your life, the experiences which changed you, the ancestors and saints of the faith who cheer you on, the God who formed you. Forget that you are knit

⁴ From writer David Keck in his *Christian Century* commentary on the text:
<https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/september-12-ordinary-24b-mark-8-27-38>

within community, and that community is bound up in humanity, and that humanity is “a group project.”⁵

“Take up your cross” becomes “take up your conquest.” (This is a high offense of Christians, particularly in America, particularly in the South, particularly among white folks, particularly among Baptists... which is why it’s essential that we call it out.) Confuse your highest citizenship with that of your country, and not of the kingdom of God. Fall for the lie that the United States is more favored by God than any other country. Put your confidence in the falsehood that Christians need political power in order to share good news, ignoring the call of the One whose power was made perfect in weakness. Conflate any decentering of Christianity in the public sphere with persecution. When Jesus asks you, “who do you say that I am,” you realize that honestly you wish he was the Fixer, the Vanquisher, the Winner.

“Save your life” becomes “protect your priorities.” Deny ourselves, but just the easiest thing to pass up. Take up your cross, but maybe just the smallest one you can find. Follow Jesus, but only until he starts leading us somewhere we don’t want to go. Lose your lives, but not really... not *actually* your lives, right? ... only the things you were ready to shed in the first place, or the relationship you were over, or the money that didn’t make a dent, or the job you were ready to leave, or the beliefs that didn’t matter much, or the stance that may have cost some comfort but certainly not your soul.

How do we get it so confused?

IV.

David Foster Wallace, the late writer and Gen X hero, once offered an instantly-classic commencement speech to the 2005 graduating class of

⁵ Thanks to Kate Bowler for this great phrase from *Good Enough*, p53.

Kenyon College.⁶ He dismantles with precision the expected address to a group of liberal arts graduates. “The single most pervasive cliché in the commencement speech genre,” he claims, “is that a liberal arts education is not so much about filling you up with knowledge as it is about “teaching you how to think.... But it isn’t really about the capacity to think, but rather about the choice of what to think about.” Later in the speech, he goes on to say, “In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.”

Foster Wallace warns the graduates to take care in what they worship and choose wisely in what they think about, because some things can “eat you alive.” If you choose to worship money and things, you’ll never feel like you have enough. If you choose to worship beauty and sexual allure, you will always feel ugly and, he says, “when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths.” “Worship power, and you will feel weak and afraid,” he said, “and you will need ever more power to keep your fears at bay. Worship your intellect and you will end up feeling stupid, always on the edge of being found out.”

These are the “default settings,” Foster Wallace says. They’re unconscious. “They’re the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that’s what you’re doing.” Or, he reminds them, you can choose another way. A way of “attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over.” But it’s up to you. You get to decide.

⁶ The speech in its entirety is one of the greats, and well worth a read. You can find the text, as well as audio and video clips here: <https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>.

David Foster Wallace wasn't a Christian speaking to other Christians. But take this perspective and set it within the Christian faith, and it sounds to me like the way Fred Craddock talked about living the Christian life. He'd say: "We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table — 'Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all.' But the reality for most of us is that [Jesus] sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting instead of doing what we want to do. Giving a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home instead of hanging out with our friends. Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul."⁷

Refusing to confuse what matters most means that we can enter into the world that Jesus describes, a world where gains may look like losses or saving may look like losing or taking up your cross may change it all. As one pastor reminds us of the model of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, taking up the cross is "the voluntary assumption of costly behavior on behalf of others in the name of Jesus Christ."⁸ It means we may loosen your grip on what we perceive to be right, so that we can take up your cross of seeking out real, honest relationship with someone in your life who you perceive to be wrong. It means we may lay down our need to fix people's problems, so that we can take up our crosses of simply bearing witness to their suffering. It means we may let go of the way your loneliness causes you to hole up in your house, or run for the quickest fix,

⁷ Classic story of the late great Fred Craddock, from *Craddock Stories*.

⁸ Grateful for this definition from Dr. John Buchanan in his sermon on this text called "Decision Time," which can be found here: <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2009/030809.html>

or surround yourself with people and things and noise so that you don't have to hear the whistle of silence, so that you can take up your cross of solitude in order that you might be still and know that God is God. It means we may winnow our hunger for all the possibilities and pleasures of this world, so that we can take up our cross of limiting ourselves with beautiful constraints. It means we may resist the urge to avoid conflict, so that we can take up your cross of speaking your truth. *For those who save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save them.* Let's not get this confused.

V.

It was seven years ago this June when our congregation had a profound opportunity to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus. You see, when faced with the reality of aging facilities, escalating costs, and more space than we could sustain, together we loosened our grip and opened our hands. We laid down the spaces we'd long loved. We let go of a ministry that reinforced our commitments to the community. We denied any impulse we may have had to save face in public, to maintain an identity that we no longer could tend. We took up our cross and sacrificed space, money, resources, status, privilege. We counted the costs of this particular discipleship, and they were stiff.

Tearing down two-thirds of our facilities and closing a longtime ministry was a remarkable moment of discipleship for our church, yet by no means was it our heaviest cross to bear or our greatest treasure to forsake. But when the time came to risk something big for something good, we were ready. We were ready because for 145 years prior, year after year after year, again and again, we had practiced our faith. We had chosen to follow Jesus over and over again:

into the margins, toward the poor, with the unhoused, among those who needed good news.

Most often it was a quarter here and a quarter there. Nothing flashy or perhaps even memorable, right? It's just what you did! You shared a meal with church friends on a Wednesday night when you were tired or cranky from a long day at work. You packed bags of food for underserved kids in East Winston to have sustenance over a weekend. You delivered Meals on Wheels to seniors scared and lonely. You made Sunday Bible study and worship a priority, though an endless stream of better Sunday options could have pulled you away. You gave some of your money – maybe at the expense of an extra trip here or a deposit into savings there – so that we could do together what we can't do apart. You said yes to the church when you were asked to serve, when you were asked to lead, when you were asked to give, when you were asked to make a hard decision.

But over time, again and again, choosing to spend your life among these people and this calling meant that when the time came to throw down a metaphorical \$1000 bill, you were ready. Our cross to bear wasn't old buildings or a hefty price tag, though those were real. Rather, our cross to bear was precisely the call to die to ourselves. Looking away from the lure to worship our place in the community. Refusing to worship our status among sister churches. Denying our tendencies to hold and hoard and grasp and tighten. Was this our greatest act of discipleship? I sure hope not. Does this mean we've made all the right decisions before and since? Of course not. Did we lose something? Did it cost us? By every metric it did. But along the way as the price tag for the project grew, the question shifted from "could we save the buildings?" to "should we save the buildings?" And your answer, our answer, was a clear no. So did we gain

a new dimension of our shared soul along the way? No question. When it mattered most, we were not confused.

Theologian Alexander Schmemmann once said, “we cannot take up our cross and follow Christ unless we have his cross which he took up in order to save us. It is his cross, not ours, that saves us.”⁹ Friends, our encouragement today is this: may you hear anew the call of Christ, may you see anew the cross he bore, may you believe anew the mercies of what you’ll lose when you gain, and may you trust anew the One whose cross makes possible the truth that we can find our lives, again and again. Amen!

⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*, p76-77.