

WGUMC February 25, 2018 "Lose Your Life!"
Mark 8:31-38

These verses in the Gospel of Mark are, for me, the scariest verses in the whole Bible. They are scary not because they talk about how Jesus is going to die, but about how we are going to have to live. They are scary because they tell a truth about following Jesus that few of us want to hear.

If the truth is about the necessity of suffering, we certainly don't want to hear it. Heck, we in California think we are suffering when the temperature dips below 50 degrees. If we wanted to suffer, we say, we would have stayed in Minnesota or New Jersey. So when Jesus started talking about how he was going to have to suffer, we totally get why Peter pulled him aside. "Jesus, don't rain on our parade. We've got a good thing going here, but you better keep it light or you're going to lose them."

Peter knew that people were not going to line up to hear bad news. Remember, Jesus, God sent you to bring good news

to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, liberty to the oppressed. [Luke 4:18] But Jesus knew that the Good News is no use unless we are willing to follow the way, hear the truth, and receive the life.

That's where Satan comes in. You may think of Satan as a character in a story or a condition in our hearts and minds. Either way, Satan is a force or combination of forces that deceive us and distract us from the way, the truth and the life. Like Peter, we always want to think that there is an easier way, that we can be successful without suffering and famous without failing, that we can have everything without losing anything, live without dying. We think this way because we are so focused on human things that we can't grasp divine things.

Deceived and distracted, we can't see how God actually works in the world. Just look at how God worked in Jesus. Jesus healed the sick. He fed the multitudes, all the while drawing bigger and bigger crowds. But his Gospel didn't go

global until he was arrested and condemned, until the soldiers humiliated him, until his disciples deserted him, leaving only women to watch him die. Jesus had to become an utter failure so that God could turn him into the ultimate victor. The cross was the quintessential gutter-to-glory kind of story. It had to be or it wouldn't be our story.

You probably watched a little or a lot of the Winter Olympics. You saw the incredible skill, strength, speed, endurance and sheer grace of the athletes. You saw the best of the best go for gold and when they won, you saw the crowds treat them like the gods and goddesses living on Mount Olympus. We like that kind of glory story, even though we will never live it ourselves. Nor will Jesus.

You won't find Jesus on Mount Olympus but a different mount called Golgotha. You won't find him on a podium hoisting a gold medal. You'll find him hoisted on a cross, sporting a crown of thorns. You will be awed not by his

strength, but by his weakness. You will be struck dumb not by his skill or speed but by his suffering. You will be moved to tears not by how he broke the world record but by how the sins of the world broke him. But in that weakness, suffering and brokenness, in that loser Jesus, God was at work winning the world.

The cross tells us that we don't have to be winners. God loves us even when we lose. God loves us in our weakness, not just in our strength. Not only that, but God can use our weaknesses to give others strength. God doesn't cause, but God can use our suffering to bring others comfort. God doesn't break us, but God can use our brokenness to make others whole. This way God has of reversing the situation and upending our expectations helps me understand what Jesus meant when he said we have to lose our life to find it.

I used to think that this verse meant that you had to be a saint or a martyr to follow Jesus. I used to think that losing

one's life for the sake of the Gospel meant dying like Jesus did, like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Archbishop Romero did. Or it meant giving up everything, like a Mother Teresa or a Dorothy Day. And I still do. But I also think that there are other meaningful ways to lose our life for Christ's sake for us lesser saints.

I think of Jesus telling the rich man to lose his money so that he can have eternal life. I think of Jesus telling the woman caught in adultery that she can lose her sin and be saved. I think of Jesus telling the Pharisees to lose their hypocrisy and the scribes to lose their self-righteousness and maybe the kingdom of heaven will let them in.

And it strikes me that there are a lot of things that we could lose, too. There are a lot of things that we are holding onto in this life, human things, that get in the way of God. We need to lose them so that God can use them. If you're an alcoholic, you need to lose that life or you will never find life.

Until you let yourself lose what is killing you, you will never know that, by the grace of God, pain is endurable, grief is bearable, life is beautiful, and you are loveable. It's true that years into recovery, your history with alcohol will still be with you. But what you can't lose, God can put to good use. Why do so many addicts become addiction counselors? AA sponsors? Because they were willing to lose their lives and now they are helping others find theirs.

If you're a perfectionist, if you are driven to distraction by a need to succeed, if you are paralyzed by a fear of failure, if Satan has put in your head that no matter what you do, you can't do enough, you can't be enough, you are living a life you need to lose for Christ's sake. As John Wesley would tell us, anyone who lives for any length of time in this hell develops a deep longing for heaven and God can use their hunger to lead others home.

So this is what it all means to me: Lose this life that doesn't really know life, deny this self that doesn't know how to love itself, take up this cross and carry it until it teaches you that your weaknesses can become the source of others' strength and the story of your getting lost can lead others to being found.

I was at a conference in Berkeley on Friday and Saturday. The conference was about churches starting social enterprises to become financially sustainable. One of the speakers on the panel was Steve North, a United Methodist pastor from Ohio. Years ago, God put a call on Steve's heart to start a new kind of church, but even though he did a lot of research and wrote up a strategic plan, he couldn't get the support of his bishop. So he took a leave of absence and moved his wife and kids to Toledo to start a ministry.

He realized that he had to lose his comfortable life, his guaranteed appointment, his housing allowance, in order to find

his real life building the kingdom of God in the city. Three times in the next eleven years, his family was homeless. Many times, they relied on donations of food and clothing. But Steve's ministry, called Lifeline Toledo, started with a group of unchurched poets and poor people and slowly began to grow. Their mission statement says, "Lifeline exists to create an organic, missional, spiritual community in Toledo, and to help lift the city out of poverty." Today, they do what he calls "micro church" in houses, coffee shops, and community centers. They cook community meals. They even bought an old Greyhound bus and converted it into a mobile health clinic. And now that Lifeline Toledo is making disciples and transforming the world, the West Ohio Conference wants to claim it and is willing to support it.

Silicon Valley is a long way from Toledo, but we have to ask ourselves what losing our life for the sake of the gospel looks like in Willow Glen. The good news of the cross is that our

weaknesses can be our greatest strength. Our losses can become someone else's gain. Every time we lose, God makes it possible for us to help someone else win. Some very disciplined athletes will come home from South Korea carrying the gold. Disciples will keep carrying our cross, waiting to see the victory of grace when we lose this life for Christ's sake. Thanks be to God.