Losing It
A Sermon by the Rev. Philip Major on Matthew 16:21-28
St. Paul’s ~ Syracuse, NY ~ August 30, 2020

Jesus told his disciples, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” This verse is at the heart of our journey in the spiritual life. To put it more boldly, there are many kinds of individual journeys we can have in life, but all spiritual journeys are characterized by people engaging in the spiritual activity of losing a piece of their life. All spiritual journeys require us to give up something.

This is a scary idea for many of us, yet, in my life and probably in your life, all of the people I look up to are people who have engaged in the process of losing their lives. In order to explore and encourage us in this process of spiritual ‘losing’ I offer you seven examples.

Let’s begin with one of the most dramatic examples of people who have exercised the power of losing; the pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong. One of the people who has spoken about the power of losing for the sake of democracy is Jimmy Lai. On August 10th Jimmy Lai was arrested in Hong Kong. Mr. Lai is the publisher of a pro-democracy newspaper in Hong Kong, called ‘Apple Daily’. Under China’s new national security law Mr. Lai could be sent to prison for the rest of his life for his work as a publisher of a pro-democracy newspaper. Recently Mr. Lai was interviewed for the PBS Newshour. I was startled by the strength and moral clarity of Mr. Lai’s responses.

The reporter asked Mr. Lai about the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong last year, “Were you …worried about security being eroded in Hong Kong?” Mr. Lai replied, “I was worried about the violence, because violence is not our power…Our power is our moral authority. We have to stay in the nonviolent and peaceful resistance.” Then the reporter asked, “Are you resigned, on a personal level, to being found guilty and spending a long time, even perhaps the rest of your life, in prison?” Mr. Lai responded, “You know, I’m not worried, because if my life is about myself, it would be meaningless. Only when I detach from myself and think of my life being about something bigger, and not about myself, that my life becomes meaningful.” Mr. Lai might be losing his freedom. The world has gained a strong voice advocating for democracy and freedom.

For some of us, following our vocation means losing our lives. The clearest example of this for me is in the life of Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church. I know more of Bishop Robinson’s story than most people, because Bishop Robinson was the bishop who ordained me as a priest. Bishop Robinson was elected by the people and clergy because he was an effective leader of the church. He was especially good at many of the parts of the job that you don’t see. Bishop Robinson brought order and important structural reforms to committees and processes in the diocese. People outside of the diocese thought of him as the gay bishop. We, members of the diocese of New Hampshire, thought of him as the effective bishop.

It was Bishop Robinson’s vocation to be a bishop. But in order to claim this calling he had to give up his life in some way. This was a gradual, painful process, but those of us who were close to Bishop Robinson could not help but see that he was giving up very, very much in order to serve as our bishop.

Bishop Robinson started receiving death threats around the time of his election, and those death threats came almost daily for many years. He resorted to wearing a bullet-proof vest for all public appearances. Years of almost constant daily threatening letters and phone calls took their toll on him; Bishop Robinson went into treatment for addiction to alcohol in the winter of 2006. Bishop Robinson sustained injuries not only from obvious opponents, but also from those who should have been supporting him, like the Archbishop of Canterbury. In 2008 Bishop Robinson was the only bishop in the entire Anglican Communion who was not invited to the Lambeth Conference by Archbishop Rowan Williams. In 2013 Bishop Robinson retired. One year later his 26-year partnership with Mark Andrew came to an end.

Bishop Robinson lost many nights of rest. He lost his health and his marriage. The church gained a powerful leader and powerful voice for full inclusion for all people, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Many people end up giving up their lives in order to be parents. Among our Sudanese members we have a family who provide a great example of this. The parents are Maduot and Angeth Aman. Maduot was a Certified Public Accountant in South Sudan. Maduot and his family were forced to leave their home because of the civil war in South Sudan. Because of language and other barriers Maduot is not working as
a CPA, but is driving a taxi in New York City. His wife Angeth works two jobs, as a full-time custodian at LeMoyne College and as a part-time custodian at St. Vincent’s Church.

Angeth and Maduot are working to support their six children as they make their way through school. From the examples I have seen I can attest it is difficult for children of refugees to succeed in America. But Angeth and Maduot are doing everything in their power to support their children. The two oldest are students at Syracuse University. Both are planning on careers in the medical profession.

Angeth and Maduot have given up many things for their children. They have lost years of their marriage together. They have given up years when they could have relaxed or pursued their own interests. Their children have gained. Their children have gained education and stability and power and freedom.

These first three examples are fairly exceptional. But part of my point today is that you and I make decisions to lose, to give away parts of our lives, every day. And in doing this, we are more alive.

Many of our Episcopal Churches have a connection to an Episcopal orphanage and school in Honduras, called El Hogar. The director of the program comes to America each year to raise funds for the school. Once I heard him tell a story about a boy who made the decision to lose.

The boy was nine or ten years old. Like all of the other children the boy was an orphan, and the other children in the school were like family to him. One of the jobs of the director was to celebrate one honor roll student each week at the school, by taking the child to McDonald’s for lunch in the city, Tegucigalpa. The boy was very happy. He had never been to a McDonald’s restaurant before. The boy ordered a cheeseburger and fries for his lunch.

When the boy’s meal arrived, he asked for a knife. The director found a plastic knife for him. Then he watched as the boy cut his cheeseburger in half, and carefully wrapped one half back up in the wrapper. The director was surprised, and asked the boy, “What are you doing?” The boy replied, “My best friend has never been to a McDonald’s. I will take this half of my cheeseburger back to school and give it to him.” The boy lost half of his lunch. Consider what was gained.

Most or perhaps all pregnant women have made some sort of decision to lose. I think we underestimate the loss because this is such a common experience. But pregnant women lose their bodies in some way. They can lose their ability to eat, to work, to travel. One woman told me she felt like she had lost her ability to think clearly and solve complex problems. Women often lose their careers when they become pregnant. In some times and places, being a woman has meant you have no prospect of having a professional career because you might someday become pregnant. The woman loses some part of her life. Consider what is gained.

You and I have lost something for the past five months. We have lost the choice of gathering in public places without wearing a mask. I went to the regional market yesterday morning. I saw at least 500 people during the 45 minutes I spent there. All but two of them were wearing face masks.

We have lost the choice of not wearing a mask in public spaces for a while. The loss is not onerous but it is real. I don’t like wearing a mask. It isn’t comfortable. It’s too warm. I feel like I am speaking through a sponge. Consider what we have gained in the state of New York. There were 30,000 deaths from the Coronavirus in New York during the spring months. Wearing masks has protected us from widespread transmission of the virus. Last week there were no deaths from the coronavirus in Onondaga county. Our willingness to lose the privilege of not wearing a mask has allowed many businesses to open and has made life safer.

My last example comes from a person I saw as I was driving around the city yesterday. There was a long line of ten or twelve cars waiting to leave a parking lot and enter a busy street. Cars kept rushing past the exit to the parking lot. Finally, one driver stopped her car and waved to the driver waiting to enter the rush of traffic. It only took about 30 seconds. All twelve cars, twelve families, were able to leave the parking lot and get on their way. The driver and a few drivers behind her lost 30 seconds. Many people gained much more than 30 seconds. They gained trust that other people are looking out for them. They gained a bit more peace and calm in their hearts from engaging in caring behavior.

Jesus taught us and showed us, those who lose their life will in some way truly be more alive. Those whose chief desire is to save their lives end up losing everything. I encourage each one of us to take a deeper step into the spiritual life by actively looking for, and practicing opportunities to lose our lives. I encourage us to give up a piece of ourselves, to make space for an activity or a will that is much greater than our activity or our will.