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“Whoever finds her life will lose it, and whoever who loses her life for my sake will find it” (Matt 10:39).

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Kgs 4:8-11, 14-16a; Ps 89; Rom 6:3-4, 8-11; Matt 10:37-42

American singer-songwriter Janis Joplin might have been proclaiming her own epitaph when she sang, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” She demonstrated that a full life is not necessarily a long life when she died of a heroin overdose in 1970 at age 27. Like the era she came to symbolize, she burned the bridges she was crossing and pushed the limits of everything she did.

Jesus asked his disciples for the same fearless intensity when he told them to find their lives by losing them for his sake. His path was not one of self-indulgence but of self-emptying love. Once they had made him the prize before their eyes, they were to find their identities in him rather than their own tribe or family, and they were not to look back. He promised them full lives and a sense of purpose greater than themselves.

Christian formation is meant to bring us to this threshold and choice. The Scriptures prepare us to expect paradox. Jesus spoke of reversals and surprises: The first would be last and the last first; leaders must be servants; loss is gain; self-surrender, not self-satisfaction, is the secret of life. Jesus demonstrated these patterns in laying down his life for us in order to take it up again with perfect and everlasting love.

St. Paul identified this paradox as the dynamic pattern of Christian baptism. To go down into the water is to die with Christ. To come up out of the water is to live a new life with him. This is ultimate freedom, for if we have died with Christ, we no longer need fear death and can live freely and fully. The truth of this pattern is all around us, in nature and in those we honor for living lives of service.

Crisis accentuates this witness. The pandemic has put a spotlight on the selflessness of medical personnel willing to risk their lives to save others. A harsher light falls on those who put their own interests before the welfare of the community by ignoring common sense health guidelines. Those who lead others to flout the common good will bear an especially heavy judgment. Since when has the American ideal of freedom ever meant being selfish and foolish?

What if discipleship is just entry-level Christianity? Have we dismissed or postponed living the Gospel because it seems only for heroes and martyrs? Is Jesus asking the impossible? In fact, the standard he set for compassion and integrity is quite ordinary and already built into the Golden Rule and the most basic of ethical principles. Treat others the way you want to be treated. Be loving if you want to be loved. Be honest, trustworthy and fair if you want to live in a decent society. Do we make discipleship seem too hard in order to avoid the rules of normal living?

We have nothing to lose and everything to gain by doing the right thing, even if it costs us our lives. Jesus promises us that those who truly live fully will also live forever.

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