Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit himself?” (Matt 16:26).

Nahum 2:1.3, 3:1-3, 6-7; Matt 16:24-28

Ambitious, self-seeking people do not forfeit their lives all at once but in small surrenders of their true selves for a counterfeit one to gain some perceived advantage. Over time they become that false self, like celebrities created by a publicist, a politician with a persona designed from polling data and a voting record built on doublespeak. No wonder some public figures fight to stay in office at all costs, for without its trappings they become the lonely, fearful “Nowhere Man” of the Beatles song.

He's a real nowhere man

Sitting in his nowhere land

Making all his nowhere plans for nobody

We are all capable of pursuing this makeover, why Jesus tells his disciples not to trade themselves to gain what passes for success, importance or power. The paradox of loss and gain is evident in many of his sayings: The first shall be last and the last first; service is the key to leadership; greatness comes from humility. Jesus models this inversion by his own descent into meekness to reveal the self-emptying God who is the opposite of the self-aggrandizing prince of this world Jesus met in the desert, the liar who promised him everything if he would only kneel to acknowledge him.

God is love, and the heart of the paradox is that by losing ourselves in others we become who we are meant to be, images of God. Who has not glimpsed this reality? A single act of genuine love is worth the whole world. Greater love than this no one has than to lay down one’s life for another. On the other hand, an act of betrayal, dishonesty, violence or hate alienates us not just from the world but from ourselves. We cannot come home again, pray or find peace and self-acceptance until we right the wrong and restore this most intimate connection to God, self and neighbor.

Today’s Gospel actually ends where yesterday’s Gospel of the Transfiguration begins. Jesus says that some of his disciple are about to see the full glory of what self-emptying love looks like. He will take Peter, James and John up the mountain to witness his divine affirmation and his meeting with Moses and Elijah before his descent to Jerusalem to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. By taking up his cross and losing his life, Jesus will claim eternal life not only for himself but for us. What the disciples see on the mountain will be accomplished in the paradox of his crucifixion

on Golgotha.

No one finds their life all at once, but in the day-to-day moments of letting go of self for the sake of love, the small courtesies that gradually form us in Christ, whose image affirmed us the day of our baptism. Taking up the cross of who we are is how we become our true selves, useful in community, available for service, part of the larger mystery of the church. If we do this, we will save our lives.

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