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“Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:24).

Deut 30:15-20; Luke 9:22-25

As the Chosen People were about to enter the Promised Land after their 40-year sojourn in the desert, Moses spoke these famous words: “I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life.” Life would be theirs if they kept the commandments and observed the Covenant. If they failed to walk in God’s ways, they would perish. The call to choose life became the foundation of their world after God had freed them from slavery and brought them safely through the desert.

It then seems paradoxical that Jesus tells his followers that if they want to save their lives, they must be willing to lose them for his sake. Those who choose life for themselves will lose it, while those who deny themselves, pick up their crosses and follow him will find life. A heroic Christian life then consisted of the willingness to die.

The first martyrs became the heroes and saints of the early church. Believers who embraced self-abnegation and asceticism, as did the first monks and nuns, became the models for spiritual perfection, while those who gave into concupiscence to marry and raise families in the world were regarded as less committed.

While these caricatures of vocational choice have found a more realistic perspective over time, the appeal to the heroic has a strong appeal in both religious and social extremism. Terrorist movements have recruited suicide bombers and political causes have attracted individuals eager to sacrifice their lives for a moment of glory

(sometimes recorded for their social media followers) rather than commit to a life of disciplined service to advance their goals.

What did Jesus mean when he told his followers to lose their lives to find them, to shoulder their crosses if they wanted to follow him? What does it mean for a Christian to choose life? Few people live in circumstances requiring them to be martyrs or to pursue dangerous activities as the only way to give themselves in service to others. What Jesus does ask is that we discern daily what obedience to God in our specific circumstances means for us. What gifts do we have that can benefit others? What responsibilities have we undertaken that make a difference in the lives of others? How does the way we live bring life, joy and encouragement to the community? How available are we to others in need within our circle of influence and capacity to help?

The Lenten call to give alms is perhaps the vaguest of disciplines until we realize that alms are more than money but another way of saying that our time, treasure and talent are gifts to us we maximize by giving them away. We begin the day filled with blessings from God, and all that is asked of us is to come in empty at the end. This is what discipleship is about. We die to ourselves and come to life in God and others.

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