

St Pius & St Anthony Homily 21st Sunday Ordinary Year A1

So, recently when we were preparing to install the new LED light fixtures in St Pius, I was struck by the labels on the box – “Do not use knife to open box”. Okay, when you have tape criss-crossing the flaps, what is one supposed to do? Yes, we did use a sharp edge, but not a knife, and I understand the purpose – the sign was giving us a heads up of how tightly packed the product was close to the opening and that cutting likely would damage or scratch the lights. And I am sure that we have all had the experiences of breaking or damaging whatever we were opening up, based on how tightly the something was wrapped, or how hard the plastic shell was, along with strong the ties inside the container. Well, those experiences give us an idea about what Jesus is talking about in the gospel today. This statement from Jesus perplexes a lot of us: “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt 16:25).

That makes me say, “Okay Jesus, come at me again with that, but a little slower next time, I am not sure I got what you said.” Because what exactly does He mean that we have to lose our life to save it? Is not losing it, losing it? Isn't Jesus all about saving and preserving, (He is the Savior?) But here Jesus is saying, “Lose, let go, give it away.” OKAY, wait, we can all raise our hands and ask, “Clarify that for me, Jesus, we need a little explanation here.” Well, Jesus gives it. Yes, He wants us to save our lives, but it is HOW we try saving that Jesus is teaching new today. We save, not by ‘selfishly and miserly locking ourselves up insulated by our own wishes, desires and preferences’. No, Jesus says that our lives will be saved in the giving away of them, the surrender of them to Him and the offering of them in service to others. That is the secret of the cross’ power of resurrection. It is the core of Christianity, as a spiritual principle of growth, life, fulfillment. It's the very dynamism of Jesus Himself (He who calls himself the Way truth and Life Jn 14:6) – Jesus pretty well says the same thing in other words, in a couple other verses scattered throughout the gospels teaching the same principle. In John 12:24, he expresses it this way: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” Or in John 15:13, He says, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends” and in John 10:17, “I lay down my life in order to take it up again.” That is the saving of one's life by losing it, giving it to others, sacrificing it to another to be born anew in them. That is durable, true growth. Losing one's life to find it! Or

being willing to let go in pure love or holy abandon, to receive what God wishes to give us. We have to open up, step aside, to let God through, and He in us will endure. I like the image of having to “empty my hands of my stuff, in order for them to be open and receive what God is placing in them”. That is why Jesus tells us to ‘deny our self, take up our cross and follow Him’. My attempts to micro-manage, overcontrol and dominate every detail of life according to my will and wish, actually robs life of Spirit – of what God would want to give me. As if God tells me, I have something to give you but you are so wrapped up insulated and bound in your own little world (loosen up, lose a little & I will give you everything, God says). Or think of this losing or surrender to God in order to have a filled-full life, as treasuring what is most fragile and precious. Life is certainly delicate, and too much handling (tight wrapping) and control from us can drain it of its spontaneous exuberance. Again, too much micro managing and dominating from our self-willing (‘My Way’ at expense of God’s Way), takes the life out of things. We experience this when we **overschedule** every second of a vacation until we find that we are just as stressed and strung out there as when we were working! Trying to save/control everything in life leads to losing/squandering it.

I can think of examples, of when I have tried to capture life (lock it up & preserve it for the ages) and that is when I end up killing it. For example, as a kid I wanted to start a bug collection. I was amazed at critters, so colorful, so unique. And I started by catching fireflies, lightning bugs. I thought, “Oh, I will keep them forever & show them to people, feeding them sugar or ants-whatever they eat!) So, I caught a lot of them and kept them locked up safely in a jar. Until I realized that not cutting holes in the jar top (loosening up a little) -they all just died. Or later I thought I would keep forever framed in a display box, a wonderful specimen of a big spider. I was told that to preserve him perfectly, I should put him in jar adding a little fingernail polish (vapors would overcome him). And yes that worked, but it ruined him, because as he died, I learned that spiders control & extend their legs by hydrostatic pressure, that as soon as life went out, so also their shape goes away and they crumble in upon themselves (called the death curl). So, by trying so hard to preserve, control and gain, I ended up again losing. My attempts to dominate and save, to micromanage and over-control, actually led to losing what I was trying to preserve. So, Jesus teaches us today the spiritual principle of resurrection and growth, which is to give away, surrender and turn

over to Him what we would want to keep forever. Jesus says, come to Him, deny ourselves, take up our cross of live following Him and we will find, gain and preserve for life eternal. But it is not our willing and doing and controlling, it is God's. This is where goes wrong today, and why Jesus tells him so strongly how off track he is. Peter was trying to dominate overcontrol and force his will on Jesus and Jesus puts Peter back in place. Peter wants to take the cross out of Christianity, the sacrifice out of Jesus' saving us. Peter wanted to control and insulate or wrap up saving Jesus in his own ideas and image of a Messiah, yet doing that Peter was taking the life out of Jesus. Peter was losing what He selfishly was trying to keep for himself. And Jesus says, 'No-Get behind me'. This whole "get behind me" talk from Jesus is about **keeping in line** with the will of God. Picture Jesus leading the apostles' formation of a single file lineup following Him. By Peter bossing and pressuring Jesus to conform to Peter's expectations, Peter was coming out around the side of Jesus (*outflanking, or like a fishtailing trailer about to come loose flying off the road on his own*). Jesus was responding, 'Get back into formation' - 'Get back in line behind me'. Jesus goes on to say, "You are not thinking as God does, but as human beings do" (My 16:23), which reminds me of how God said through Isaiah to a wayward-offtrack people "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). So, we don't want to repeat Peter's mistake of arrogant presumption and dare to 'TELL' God how to run His world and by trying to overcontrol and save/dominate every detail, end up losing all that God would be trying to give us. I have to remember that in every Lord's Prayer I offer, I proclaim "God, Your will be done-Your kingdom come" Not my world, not my will, but God's will and God's kingdom. To receive daily bread, I have to have open hands. Surrender and give, or lose in order to save. If I empty my hand of what I am trying to dominate and control, then I will find that God places in my hand all that I need and more. Not my will, not my kingdom, but God's will be done, His kingdom come.