

Lent 2 B
St. Mark 8:31-38
February 25, 2018
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

A Perplexing Paradox

"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

If you want to save your life, than be prepared to lose it, because if you hang onto it you will lose it. If you let go of your life, if you are open to change and God's upward call, then you will save yourself and your life.

This is a crazy logic that challenges everything in our lives and every way we think. I am all about survival and protecting myself and those I love. When I feel a threat on the horizon, I go into safety mode. I put up the walls and barriers which I hope are impenetrable. The barriers can be both physical and psychological. I won't let anybody in, nor will I give an inch. I fight to maintain the status quo.

If you want to hold onto the past, if you want to hold onto the present and the way you have been doing things, that ultimately will not work. Change beckons us to move forward. Staying where we are at, putting all our energy into staying where we are and protecting where we are, will ultimately mean that we will lose everything. Indeed, "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

Jesus challenges us with other very striking observations in the Gospels.

Remember the story of the rich man? [It appears in Mark 10:17-23]:

"As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving,

for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' The answer is: Go sell what you have and give to the poor. This advice hardly sits well with anyone. And the rich man was deeply grieved because at once, he understood what this meant. Change is not so easy. It is a struggle to move forward spiritually sometimes. It can cause internal struggles. It can cause us to be angry as we wrestle with change. It can cause us to grieve as we accept it.

Another time Jesus challenges us with the story of those who wish to follow him: [see Luke 9:59-62]

"Jesus said to another man, 'Follow me.' But he replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'" While the observation seems harsh, Jesus knows our penchant for finding and making excuses not to do something-even good excuses like these. I know I have procrastinated about doing needful and important things because of my fear of the task ahead. It is far easier to stay put and not make those tough decisions. Problem is, not to decide, is to decide!

Yesterday, I was very busy organizing my too abundant stuff. It is no secret that I am trying to practice minimalism and get rid of the abundance of extra junk I have collected. Lynn was helping me out-but almost anyone with an objective point of view might have been pushing me to make changes and follow my own goals. She challenged my assumptions and reasons for saving things and putting them in the closet that I was trying to make space in. It may sound silly, but one of the things that I was saving was some bar soap-about 11 brand new bars of them. Now that takes up a lot of space in the small closet I have in my small condo. Lynn pointed out that I do not use bar soap any more- I use body wash gel, and have been for more than 4 years.

"Why and for what are you saving those?" she asked.

"Well. In case I run out of the gel," I answered.

"You have three extra bottles of that," she observed!

"Well then," I said, "I am saving it to use on vacation."

Her reply: "I have never seen you use bar soap on vacation!"

And of course, she was right. Why was it so hard for me to let go of my soap? Why did I need to hoard it, when someone else could make good use of it? I brought it in for use in our pantry this morning. Now there were many other examples of my resistance to this process of minimalizing, yesterday and in the past, but I site this

one so you can get the idea of what I am talking about. I was feeling a little angry and sad about the passing of the bar soap from my life. Imagine being so sentimental about old soap! And then I quickly realized how silly I was being and I was reminded of my real goals to simplify my life here! I also realized that I was fodder for my own sermon!

Many of us do the same with all that hotel soap and shampoo we collect on vacation, and have tons of it in a drawer or closet taking up space for the stuff we never use- even for the guests who visit us that we say we are saving it for, or taking it on the next vacation...But why would we? ...we remind ourselves, because there is more of this stuff to pick up for our collection in the hotel we stay at when we go on the next vacation we take! (I have been known to pick up my favorite toiletries at the local CVS when we arrive after flying somewhere anyway!)

So some of you are thinking, how does letting go of a few bars of soap compare with letting go of your life to save it? It is the same thing. Moving forward in life is a process of letting go of the past, and yes, the present we are stuck in. To gain more life, you need to be prepared to let go of what you perceive is your life. Let go of the perception, take the risk and challenge that the Spirit is moving you in. You will not be disappointed.

By the way-if your think you need that bar soap in heaven or all those hotel toiletries you have collected, think again...

If we want to be free, and God wants us to be free, than here you have a way to be in the world, and yet not of the world. We are called to live, and not die amongst our possessions, prestige and position in life, nor our precious habits and routines. Break free of these. Let go and let God. Easy to say, yet as the rich man can tell you, (and me too) it is not so easy to do! AMEN