13th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Fr. Bob’s homily at Chautauqua

Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Look deeply into these readings, and I believe we will see that all three are about life: losing it, and finding it. Jesus summarizes the message with that central line from his missionary discourse:

*Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

Jesus proclaims this paradoxical but essential truth about finding life by losing it, gives a challenging way to express it; he also lived this way, and calls us to follow the way.

First, there is letting go, or detachment. While we may recognize that there can’t be room for God in our lives if our lives are completely filled with other things, he challenges us in the strongest possible way. Namely, we can’t love our family and loved ones more than Christ. We have to let go of those relationships as our tightest attachment, so we can first be rooted in God, and then love others. If you are sitting there thinking: ‘whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me’ sounds harsh, almost wrong, you aren’t alone. I believe it is intended to shock us into sitting up and taking notice. Let me say a word or two about understanding this, and then move on to our 1st reading.

My dad has been a mechanic all his life, and in his 80’s, he is still fixing things. I on the other hand didn’t inherit that very useful gift, and never really developed that skill set. But that doesn’t mean I never try. I won’t bore you with the details, the stories are many. In short, I would try quickly to fix something, too often wouldn’t get it back together again right, and dad would have to step in, take whatever back apart, and show me how to assemble it correctly. Detach what was in the wrong place, and reattach correctly.

Why do we need to let go? Why is detachment so essential to being a disciple of Jesus?

Unless things are attached the right way, they don’t work. They often need to be unattached and put together right. Our attachments to others are often heavily tainted by self-interest, and we don’t even see it. It’s natural and normal for infants to be attached to their parents because they depend on their parents for almost every need. But growing up, we need to realize it really is only God who can provide everything we need.

Sometimes it is obvious when a parent is attached to their child in part because of their own needs, like pride, fulfilment, a sense of purpose. But sometimes the self-interest piece is very subtle. That doesn’t necessarily make it less problematic. The healthiest thing for both parent and child is for the parent to see the child as a gift from God, be grateful for the gift, and respond with freeing love, rooted in God’s love for parent and child both. We need to let go of a kind of clinging attachment, and then love as God loves us, which allows the one loving and the one loved to be free. That is letting go. That is losing and finding. That is true life, full life, divine, life-giving life and love.
Letting go and letting in. The first is also called detachment. The second, letting in, is true hospitality. The more we let go, the more open and empty we allow ourselves to be, the more room to let others into our life, true hospitality.

The Shunamite woman in our 1st reading didn’t say “Hey Elisha, I have a deal for you. What can I get if I invite you to dinner, and then provide a little room for you?” Read the whole story. She simply extended herself, and invited Elisha into her home and her life because he was a holy man of God. Notice closely. Her hospitality wasn’t just ‘being nice’. She opened her home and her life to Elisha, while leaving him free to come and go. That is the virtue of pure hospitality. The result for her: the gift of life expanded, blossomed, exploded into the gift of generating life, the gift of a son. To add the exclamation point, the story goes on to relate how this miracle son died suddenly. The woman sent for Elisha, and through his prayer he brought the young child back to life. Her initial hospitality, letting Elisha into her life was unbelievably life-giving! It led to life beyond the grasp of death!!

Letting go, letting in, losing and truly gaining: St. Paul wraps up this Paschal mystery of our Christian life by inviting the Romans to reflect on baptism. They had all gone into the waters as sinners and had come out saints in the making. He confirmed their shared faith: being a disciple, being a member of the Christian community, we let go of sin, an old way of life, selfish living and imperfect loving, and bury those things in the water of baptism. Their power over us is washed away. We rise from the water freed, forgiven a new creation. By God’s grace, we learn more and more to live a new life, to love with God’s freeing, self-giving, generous, generative, life giving love.

The life we let go of is attached to this world, too weighed down by self-interest. It can never lead us out of this world into eternal joy. But let go, let in, and the fullness of life is ours!

Over and over we practice letting go and letting in, detachment, and hospitality, until the day we are called to the last act of letting go, letting go of mortal life, to be embraced, welcomed, and to be joined together with God in eternal life.

Bianco of Siena captured beautifully in poetry the transformation possible when we let go and let in. Ralph Vaughan Williams set the text to music: (search “Come Down, O Love Divine” to hear it sung!)

_Come down, O love divine, seek Thou this soul of mine,_

_And visit it with Thine own ardor glowing._

_O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear,_

_And kindle it, Thy holy flame bestowing._

_O let it freely burn, til earthly passions turn_
To dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
And let Thy glorious light shine ever on my sight,
And clothe me round, the while my path illumining.

Let holy charity mine outward vesture be,
And lowliness become mine inner clothing;
True lowliness of heart, which takes the humbler part,
And o’er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

And so the yearning strong, with which the soul will long,
Shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace, till he become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling.