

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

LOST IT, GOT IT, GIVE IT AWAY

Matthew 16:21-28

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Analysis by Eric W. Evers

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? 27 "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

DIAGNOSIS: Lost It

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *We're Losing It*

"Those who want to save their life will lose it... What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" Where does this come from? Peter's objection seems to be centered in his cultural understanding of the Christ, after all. The Messiah shouldn't be killed. So why doesn't Jesus debate him at the theological level? Because he knows the root of Peter's rebuke: if suffering and death are what await Jesus, Peter reasons that a similar fate lies in store for him. "God forbid it, Lord!" The fisherman left everything to follow Jesus, okay; but give up his life? Following a suffering Messiah is not what he had in mind. Isn't this us, as well? We have gained the whole world. Food, health care, living accommodations, travel, entertainment options.... We live in luxury unimaginable throughout most of human history. So where is the happiness and satisfaction we might expect to follow from that fact? We are anxious and stressed, over-scheduled and under-informed. Civility and rationality are strangely absent in the ways we talk about the important issues of our day. We are disconnected from those around us. Our "souls," the fabric of our lives, are stretched, torn, frayed, and perhaps even lost.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *We've Misplaced It*

There's a reason for this. "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Peter saw success—for himself, and for the cause of the Messiah—from a human, worldly perspective. So it is for us. If our lives have come unhinged, it is because we've put our minds—and our hearts—on the wrong things. We are rich in the stuff of this world because that is what we pursue. We have countless comforts, because that's what we chase. We pour our souls into efforts to shore up, expand, protect, and pad our lives. But sacrifice? Giving? Serving?

Pausing from the breakneck pace of acquisition in order to rest, to worship, to pray? Putting our neighbors before ourselves? No; that runs too great a risk: we might suffer. We might lose out on something. Instead, we just push ourselves a little harder, sure that somewhere we can find the right product, the right book, or the right guru who can show us how to fill up the nagging emptiness and patch over the feeling that it's all just not working. But what we're missing is "divine,"-Jesus, the Messiah.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *We're Opposing the One Who Gives It*

We. Us. Ourselves. It's all about me: our efforts, our comforts, our lives. But the more tightly we grasp at these things, the more we close our hands to the only One who can really give strength, blessing, and life: Christ. In our self-absorption, we set ourselves against the Spirit of Christ, who gives himself away for the sake of others. We may gain the world, but we lose our lives, and worse we oppose Christ's perspective; so Jesus says, even to us, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me." Jesus is the one who gives the life we need, but we have set ourselves against him. And we cannot afford the cost for such opposition.

PROGNOSIS: Got It, Give It Away

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Wins It*

We cannot afford the cost, but the Father can; and so for us just, as with Peter, the relationship to Jesus does not end. Jesus, Matthew tells us, was showing "his disciples that he must... be killed, and on the third day be raised." That "must" (dei in Greek) shows divine necessity. Jesus must go to the cross, die at the hands of sinners who are opposed to him, and be raised again. Why? Because this is how the Father wills to pay the price for humanity. It is how he chooses to give life

back to creatures who have thrown it away. Jesus must die and rise again, because doing so will give salvation to sinners and turn “stumbling block Satans” into redeemed saints.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *We Get It*

Having been given life by Jesus, which is forgiveness and salvation, now we can “become his followers.” The life he gives is a cruciform existence. He summons us to a new way, a new path, one of divine things. It is about self-giving, sacrifice, and denial of our own comfort and excesses. And in the world’s eyes, it will look like we are losing our lives. In North America, we do not literally put our lives on the line to follow Jesus. But we do let go of the kind of life that our culture values—where everything is a commodity to be used up and disposed of. In return for losing “the world,” though, we receive our souls. There is peace, purpose, and even joy to replace the unhinged emptiness of careening down the world’s pathway.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *We Give It Away*

Just as “human things” encourage hoarding and accumulating, a life rich in “divine things” gives rise to multiplication. “Those who lose their life for my sake,” Jesus says, “will find it.” It is in turning ourselves over to God and to neighbor, in loving response to Christ’s saving mercy, that we find ourselves made whole. We become who God created and saved us to be when we stop trying to preserve, protect, or reinvent ourselves and instead set our minds on Savior and neighbor. Instead of self-negation, we will find creative, life-giving freedom. Giving ourselves away leads only to more (more authentic, more Spirit-ed) self to give.