

Matthew 10:38-42  
Losing god  
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So here's a question for you to discuss among yourselves on social media or over the phone: I wonder how you've used this time at home? Did you start that book that you've been meaning to get around to? Did you organize those shoe boxes of old family photos or organize the attic? Did you experiment with that new recipe you've been wanting try? This week, after the kids were in bed I re-watched the HBO World War II miniseries Band of Brothers. One of the closing episodes opens with a string quartet playing this beautiful Beethoven piece, Opus 131 in C sharp minor, in the middle of a city that had been utterly decimated by the war.

The dichotomy of beginning to clean up and rebuild was almost beyond comprehension, and yet in the middle of the rubble 4 instruments sitting and playing this beautiful piece of music was exactly the right thing to be doing.

Quick check in: I wonder how this last week was for you? I bet it was full of new challenges you didn't anticipate. But in the midst of all that's going on, known and unknown, was there also a certain level of simplicity and peace that came with it? Beethoven in the barrage?

Throughout this season of Lent we have been looking at two chapters from Matthew's Gospel. In these handful of verses are some of the richest insights on how we are to live missionally in whatever context we find ourselves. New Testament Scholar Dale Bruner calls these two chapters Jesus' Sermon on Mission. Matthew 5-7 is the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 10-11 is the sermon on mission.

You might be thinking to yourself, this is really unprecedented time in which the Church is finding itself. But if you think about it, every time, every age, every new cultural or social challenge is unprecedented for the church, because every new development presents a new and unique challenge for how the Church interprets Christ's calling in its life. Whether its Corona or AIDS or polio, Social Media or Social Unrest, Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, or Normandy, in every new reality we've lived into Jesus' people have had to answer the question: what then does the Gospel say to us and require of us in this time?

This morning we come to a familiar passage where Jesus issues a command to those who would be his followers, take up your cross. And what we see is that as we accept that calling daily, the choice to lose ourselves for him, we will paradoxically find the truest life possible. Listen to Matthew 10:38-11:6

**And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup>Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. <sup>41</sup>The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. <sup>42</sup>And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."**

It's interesting, what it takes in life—at times—to gain clarity. This week I also picked up a book that's been on my list for a long time, Dickens' Tale of Two Cities that begins with that famous line: "It was the best of times it was the worst of times." That sounds about right.

Sometimes we need the layers and layers of build-up stripped away from our eyes and our lives to see clearly. Does it feel like layer upon layer of life is being systematically removed from us during Corona? What I mean is that as we are asked to self-quarantine, to avoid all contact with others, as our personal safety nets and financial fail-safes are eroding, and we're left with feelings of insecurity and isolation.

Is that actually bad news? Or is that bad news the prelude to good news?

Might this not be a time when life becomes actually very simple? Is it actually in fact a gift that life is becoming much simpler and we seem to be responding with very intentional responses? Are there simple ways of recovering some of the practices that make us the beloved of God and one another? And are there simple ways of reconnecting with God in this time?

This week I sent out to you a copy of our updated church directory. One phone call a day to someone in the church, it's personal, it's totally non-communicable, it could be life-saving to another to have that simple expression of human contact in a time of isolation.

A quiet walk in the woods or around the block to listen to the quiet whispers of the wind and ground under your feet. Preparing a meal and giving thanks for the simple gift so often overlooked when we're too busy to notice.

So in a way, is it really bad news? What's happening. Of course I'm being somewhat facetious, but you see where I'm coming from.

Or, is it the worst news? The darkness that's just before the dawn?

When Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him you see that the verb is in the active not the passive tense—take up your cross, not accept what comes to you. Take it up! Grace we receive, love we receive, truth and beauty and our being we receive, but our life with Jesus, the decision follow him—come what may—that we take up!

Jesus says whoever loses his life for my sake will find it, he's inviting us to faith on his terms, not ours. We have always preferred to have God on our terms. Our gods all promise us so many things, health, wealth, security, good friends, adoring family. Our gods are all promises and no demands. It's why when Moses went up Mt Saini and ended up taking a little too long the people brought all their gold and whipped up a substitute, something more convenient that honored their schedules. After all, we're busy people with schedules and demands on our time. That god—scripture calls an idol—is all promise and no demand. This is the kind of god that has instrumental use in our lives. Again, all promises, no demands.

When Jesus makes the demand on our life to take up our cross and follow he promises that what we will ultimate find is life and nothing short of it. But even that, life itself, we must be willing to submit to his own authority, we must be willing hold on loosely to the very thing Jesus promises, because in order to receive true life we must be willing to lose it for his sake.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century Theologian John of the Cross experienced this extreme simplification—stripping away of all from his life—not by his choice, but through persecution for the reforms he tried to bring to the monastic houses in Spain. In prison he saw all of his life’s work undone, that’s where he wrote his most well-known work *The Dark Night of the Soul*. In which he tells us that the reward for a life of prayer...the reward...is the dark night of the soul.

In the dark night you hang on the cross with Jesus while everything else falls away. All of the layers and layers of stuff we use to insulate our lives, in the dark night it all begins to fall away. Pastor and Theologian Craig Barnes says that in this time you even think you’re losing God, but what you’re losing is the instrumental use for God. And the question is whether you’re still interested if all the instrumental benefits are gone? When it’s God plus nothing.

This sounds really bleak I know, and I’m sorry, but here comes the turn. Those who have passed through the dark night, who have affirmed God plus nothing, who have shed the instrumental use for God, those are the ones who are truly free. They’re free because they’re not anxious about losing stuff anymore, because they’ve already lost it all. They’ve learned to live life with open hands. From open hands things can be taken away, but it’s only into open hands that new blessings can be given.

Again, I mentioned Band of Brothers at the beginning of this message. There is another scene that jumped out at me that I hadn’t noticed before. Early in the series during an intense moment of battle Lt. Speirs, one of the commanding officers finds one of his soldiers sitting on the sideline gripped with fear in the middle of a battle and unable to move. And he said to him—go with me on this—The only hope you have is to accept the fact that you’re already dead. The sooner you accept that, the sooner you’ll be able to function as a soldier is supposed to function. Later you see Lt. Speirs run from the front line, through the field of battle in the middle of fire fight, make communication with another company, then run back through the fire fight unscathed. The Germans were so taken aback at the fearlessness of what they were seeing they didn’t even think to shoot.

In your baptisms you were buried with Christ in his death, and in your baptisms you were also raised with him in resurrected life, and in that you are untouchable. Those who daily affirm that they are buried with Christ in baptism are free to live fearlessly and freely and for others in Christ’s resurrection. The sooner you accept the fact that you are accepted and raised with Christ through his death and resurrection, the sooner you’ll be able to function as a disciple—fearless in the mission of hope in a desperate world.

Then Jesus goes on to talk about the rewards that followers of him may expect: the reward of the prophet, the reward of the righteous. But whoever gives to these little ones, this is an even greater striving, because it does not have a return in mind, only obedience to the C.O. Because he knows that this commanding officer is the only one who has the words of everlasting life.

In John 6 after Jesus had given some particularly challenging teaching, telling those around him that he is the bread of heaven and unless you partake of me you have no place with me, people began to take offense. One by one they left opting for this (closed fists) over this (open handed receiving). At one point Jesus turns and sees that basically everyone has left but his disciples and he says to them: **“do you want to leave as well?”**

Peter says: **“To whom shall we go? Who else has the words of everlasting life?”**

Obedience with nothing more than the knowledge that you are doing to others as Jesus would have you. That is the return on investment in the Kingdom of God. This is the mission of Christ in the Church, not that we're filled with prophetic and insightful people, or people who are righteous because they have proved their godliness. But people who would give a cup of cold water to a person in need, people who can see beauty and goodness in the midst of chaos, Beethoven in the barrage. The mission of the church is that in our life together we would not become more fully actualized, super spiritual people, but that we would become more submitted to Jesus—and in so doing, paradoxically, we become more fully human.

In John 3, John the Baptist is fielding some questions from his disciples about how they were both, John and Jesus, were baptizing. And John responds to his disciples:

**A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. <sup>30</sup> He must increase, but I must decrease."**

The early church was called "Christians" by the powers-that-be for the first time in Antioch (Acts 11:26). It wasn't a name Jesus' disciples gave themselves—it was a name given to them by the society in Antioch. But why a new name for this group of Christ-followers? Why, from the perspective of outsiders, weren't they simply lumped in with all the other variants of the Jewish faith?

Antioch was referred to as "all the world in one city," where you could see all the world's richness and diversity in one place. And the marketplace was its hub. Antioch was designed like most cities of that day: A circular wall on the outside, a marketplace in the center, with the interior of the city walled in way that divided different people groups from one another.

Enter Christ-followers. Enter the Gospel. The Church came to Antioch and began breaking down the dividing barriers in a way that upset the society's existing categories. People from all parts of the city—Jews and Gentiles alike—were suddenly coming together. This group of people was redefining community in a radical and unprecedented way, so much so, that a new word was needed to categorize what in the world was happening.

They were doing this because taking up their cross they had nothing left to lose, and because they had already found the thing that was more valuable to them than life itself—Jesus Christ.

Where else can we go? Who else has the words of everlasting life? So will we take up our cross and follow him?