

“What’s This Life We Have to Lose?”
September 13, 2009

James 3:1-5a
Mark 8:27-37

I just recently finished reading Karen Armstrong’s *Through a Narrow Gate*. As some of you know, Armstrong is a prolific author and speaker who considers herself a “freelance monotheist,” someone who draws deeply from many different religious traditions in her own religious life. This particular book is Armstrong’s memoir of her seven years as a postulant, novice, and then nun in an especially strict Catholic order in the 1960’s. As you might guess, since she lasted only seven years in the order and no longer considers herself a Christian, her memoir of those years contains a good deal of pain, confusion, and alienation, as well as real love, joy, and discovery.

Many of Armstrong’s pre-Vatican II experiences in that order of nuns could, I think, be fairly described as brutal and abusive, both physically and psychologically. Over time, wounded human beings within a deeply imperfect institution had developed rules and practices *intended* to make greater union with God more possible that, in reality, could just as easily lead to profound alienation from the Spirit’s presence within oneself and others.

Those years of Karen Armstrong’s life are years in which human woundedness, institutional flaws, and the particular dangers of unquestioned authority all play pivotal and troubling roles. And in the midst of that woundedness and danger – perhaps even at their root – lies the message from this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Mark. At the heart of the Biblical reasons for those disturbing, destructive practices that Armstrong describes lies Jesus’ teaching, that if you want to follow him, you must deny yourself and you must lose your life for his sake and the sake of the gospel.

So this morning I need to start by acknowledging how very destructive the words of the Bible can be and have been. I need to start with how destructive these specific words can be and have been: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves. Those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it.” This teaching, in the hands of someone with unchecked power over others’ lives or in the heart of someone who’s convinced of his or her own worthlessness, can easily be dangerous, Spirit-denying, even blasphemous.

It can be blasphemous because the Christian and Jewish traditions teach that God made us in God’s own image. They teach that there is something of the holy in each and every one of us. The spark of the divine, the light of God, the presence of the Spirit ... in *everyone*. So to understand Jesus’ teaching in any way that denies or tries to erase that spark, that presence, that light, is to understand it *not at all*.

As I read Karen Armstrong’s memoirs, the near-tragedy of her years within that religious order is that the *self* her some of her superiors and she herself worked so hard to deny was the self as God had shaped it in grace and love. The *life* she was urged and tried for a time to lose was the very life in which the Spirit was most present – the life of her intellectual gifts and her ability to love others.

And yet, despite its clear and realized dangers, this teaching remains one in which generations of Christians have found a life-giving blessing, filled with love, grace, and

courage. How is that possible? What truth have so many found in a teaching that can be so easily used to oppress, to harm, and to block the Spirit's movement?

Oddly enough, in a progressive Christian church, I think we need to start with a literal reading of these words. Jesus teaches that anyone who loses her life for the sake of the gospel will save her life. But just what does it mean to lose one's life for the sake of the gospel?

First of all, someone can lose his life for the gospel quite literally, because the gospel was and is a subversive word of truth. In Jesus' own life, in the lives of several of the early apostles – Stephan, Peter, and Paul to name a few – in the lives of the known and unknown men and women martyred in the first three hundred years after Jesus' death, proclaiming and trying to live the gospel in the Roman Empire could mean that you had to put your life on the line and run the risk of death at the hands of the people and institutions threatened by the gospel's radical message.

To proclaim that Jesus, and *not the Emperor*, was lord and savior; to proclaim that in Jesus, and *not in the Emperor*, one could see the face of God; to proclaim that the last and least of people, and *not the first and most powerful*, would be first in God's commonwealth ... to proclaim and try to live such a gospel was subversive of the status quo, a threat to law and order, a challenge to those whose positions and privileges required the dominance and exploitation of others. And in the face of such a threat, the Empire could, and often did, strike back, with persecution and execution.

The Roman Empire is gone, the Roman Emperor is no more, but, even now, to proclaim the good news made known through Jesus – the good news that calls us to worship and follow a God of love, mercy, and justice – is still subversive, and to proclaim and try to live that good news can still be dangerous to life and limb. You see, the empire and the emperor, in different forms and incarnations, still demand our allegiance and, quite often, they get it. So the gospel *remains* a threat to the current emperors and empires, and they can still strike back.

Today, instead of "Caesar" and "Rome," the emperor and empire can have many different names. We are called to worship and obey the dictates of global capitalism, the free market, unending economic expansion. We are called to celebrate and follow military power and the ideology that says the rich are rich because they deserve it and the poor are poor because they don't work hard enough. We are called to worship the god that declares that to be human is to buy and own and consume. We are called to worship and obey the god of self-interest, protecting what we have from those who don't have. We are called to worship in the temple of the latest technological gadget without ever asking what and whose interest this gadget serves or whether it brings us closer to God's vision of *Shalom*.

The Gospel still challenges "The Way Things Are" – the way of gross inequality, injustice, consumption, and never-ending war, and it is still true that proclaiming and trying to live that Gospel can cost you your life – your literal, physical life. That is what happened to Rev. Martin Luther King, to Archbishop Oscar Romero, to countless nuns, priests, and others who have stood in solidarity with the poor in Central America, to pastors and other church workers in the Philippines who have worked for justice and true peace, and it has happened and continues to happen to others whose names we will never know.

So Jesus' teaching that, in losing our life for the sake of the gospel, we actually save our life is a warning about the physical dangers his disciples face and a comforting reminder that God's gift of life and love goes far beyond this temporal life. Jesus' teaching is a call to dare to live fully and faithfully in the midst of what the hymn "Amazing Grace" calls "dangers, toils, and snares," so we can receive and welcome God's gift of life, no matter how long *or how short* its physical manifestation may be.

But let's be honest this morning. Within the confines of life in Sonoma, California, few of us are at risk of losing our lives in any literal way if we proclaim and try to live the Gospel that teaches the last will be first and the first shall be last. Few of us will be risking persecution, imprisonment, or death if we proclaim the sovereignty of a God of love, mercy, and justice. And I'd be willing to bet that none of us will be risking martyrdom if we stand in the plaza, spreading the good news of God's love for all of creation and God's call to justice and peace.

So if Jesus' call to lose our lives in order to save them isn't about risking our physical lives, at least not this morning, and if it isn't about the sort of unfaithful self-denial and loss of life that Karen Armstrong describes in her memoir, what *is* it about? Is there anything left in his call for us to hear and then try to live?

I think there is. I think there are *many* things left in his call to lose our lives in order to gain our lives in God. Jesus is reminding us that there is always something in our lives and in our very selves that we need to lose because it stands in the way of receiving the fullness of life God is offering us. The exact shape and size and character and nature of that something is unique to each person, but experience and tradition suggest that there are recurring themes. One formulation of those recurring themes is the list of seven deadly sins – pride, lust, envy, anger, covetousness, gluttony, sloth – seven different ways that we can hinder the Spirit's work in us and can, thus, never gain the lives God is offering us.

There are, of course, other ways of describing the life within us we must lose to be able to gain our full lives as people created and beloved of God. At least some of those other ways have less baggage within a congregation like this one that is inclined to bristle at the very mention of the word "sin."

So even though I think grappling with the list of seven deadly sins can be very fruitful, I want to leave you this morning with just one of those other, less bristly ways to hear the gospel's message about losing our lives. I want to leave you with this.

In and through Jesus, God calls us to lose the life within us that is desperate to know that we matter. God calls us to lose the life within us that is desperate to prove our worth. In some of us, this desperation comes out through a relentless drive to accumulate – possessions, money, accomplishments, experiences, educational degrees – anything that seems to announce to the world and to ourselves that we are worthy, we are important, we are entitled to more, always more. In others of us, this desperation comes out more quietly, but no less destructively, in giving more and more of ourselves to others – our family, our jobs, our friends, our favorite causes – even when it's clear we have long since run out of anything to give.

In and through Jesus, God calls us to lose this life, this part of ourselves, that is blind to the preciousness of all life. God calls us to lose both the lie that we are more beloved than others and the fear that we are not beloved at all. Each of us may be in the grip of the lie and the fear in different ways and at different times, but God calls us to

lose them, to let them die. And in their death comes our life, rooted in the truth that we are nothing more and nothing less than threads in a glorious tapestry of creation. In their death comes our life, a life that includes and goes beyond life as we know it on this earth.

So let us lose our lives, so that we might have the fullness of life the Holy One longs for us all to have.

Amen.

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