

Sermon: “Search Party”

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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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 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? 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. 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.”

— *Matthew 16:21-28*

There was a group of tourists traveling by bus through Iceland. They made a pit stop near Eldgja Canyon National Park. One of the women from the group went inside to change her clothes and freshen up a bit.

When she returned to the bus someone told her that a passenger had gone missing. She joined the nearly fifty-person search party for this lost passenger. They looked everywhere and canvassed the landscape.

Still, there was no sign of the missing person. The search became more and more intense and frenzied. At 3:00 a.m., just as the Coast Guard was about to join the search, one of the other passengers realized that the woman they were searching for was with them all along. She had just changed her clothes and freshened up.

The woman had unwittingly joined her own search party.

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Losing yourself is not *usually* as drastic as joining your own search and rescue party. However, Jesus invites us to lose ourselves. He says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

This is distinct from the first time Jesus called people to follow him: “Follow me and become fishers of people.” Jesus then ministered in Galilee. He preached that the kingdom of God was near. He cured people of diseases and took away stigma. He fed

thousands. Finally, the disciples got him to admit his identity as Messiah, which must have brought a deep sense of relief to them. The Messiah was going to restore a sense of freedom and peace. And, oh, they would've loved to be a part of that. Maybe, they will find themselves important and heroic.

Jesus, though, responded by talking about suffering, death, and rising again. This was the first time that Jesus predicted his own death. When Peter tried to stop the conversation, Jesus said, "Lose yourself."

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Once there was a person in New Jersey who wanted to find himself. He was dissatisfied that he didn't have better opportunities in life to live out his faith. This was in the early 1960s, and he knew a lot about Will Campbell. Will was one of the four people who escorted the Little Rock Nine into Central High School in 1957. He was the only white person present for the founding of the Southern Leadership Christian Conference.

Clearly, the man thought, Will could put him to use if he came down south and joined his cause. This man really wanted to find himself. He wanted to make a meaningful life and impact the world. He could be part of a significant social movement to bring about freedom and peace. He thought the best thing to do was to make a phone call and ask how he could help.

"Where are you now?" Campbell responded to his offer.

"I'm at a payphone in Newark," the man replied.

"Oh, interesting," he said. "Is it one of those glass booths?"

"Yes, it is," said the puzzled man.

"Are there any people out there, or are the streets deserted?"

"There are lots of people."

"Well, son," Campbell said, "that's your ministry. Go to it."

Will Campbell's words were an invitation for the man to lose himself and give up preconceived notions of what it means to live justly and faithfully. This allows him to serve others in his own community and with his own life.

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Figuring out what it means to lose yourself can be overwhelming.

It is certainly complicated by how this scripture has been used to cause harm. Tragically, people in abusive relationships have been told to "stay" and "bear their cross." LGBTQ+ folks have been told to "deny themselves" or "repress" who they are. Again, these interpretations are harmful.

Feminist theologians have, thankfully, pointed out that pride, despite what the earlier theologians suggested, may not be the root of all sin. For those systemically removed from selfhood because of their identity or social status, what separates them

from wholeness with God is not pride. Rather, those who have experienced self-loss actually must learn to love themselves and assert their personhood.

When Jesus speaks of losing ourselves, he is not speaking of this loss of human dignity. We are all going to hear these words “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” differently—and that is okay. We stand in different phone booths on different streets with different people walking by. We see different needs in the world, and we bring different gifts.

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What does it mean to lose yourself?

A couple of years ago, students at the University of Chicago heard some contrarian advice at their commencement from commentator David Brooks. The advice pushed against the typical implications that students should “find themselves first and then go off and live their quest.” I’m sure you have heard some version of that speech at some point in your life.

Here is what the students heard that day instead: “Most successful young people don’t look inside and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life. A relative suffers from Alzheimer’s and a young woman feels called to help cure that disease. A young man works under a miserable boss and must develop management skills so his department can function. Another young woman finds herself confronted by an opportunity she never thought of in a job category she never imagined. This wasn’t in her plans, but this is where she can make her contribution. Most people don’t form a self and then lead a life. They are called by a problem, and the self is constructed gradually by their calling ... The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It’s to lose yourself.”¹

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This is true for congregations, too. I am often impressed at how well congregations have been able to identify needs in the world and try to meet them. People here see need and are encouraged to respond with conviction. In this ministry, people are invited to explore their passion—justice work, earth care, radical hospitality, and life-giving worship and music. It is really hard to keep up with everything going on! But the only thing that can hold all of that passion, conviction, and curiosity together is a faith that empowers us to give ourselves away for the life of the world. It’s losing yourself.

Many congregations right now are in a pattern of holding everything really tightly. It’s hard to hear this unwelcome call to lose ourselves. Our desire to find ourselves—to hold on to idealized pasts—takes all the oxygen out of the room. It’s the quickest way to lose vitality. But Jesus says those “who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Congregations have become anxious about the future and often grasp things too tightly. This makes it hard to give ourselves away for the life of the world. Instead,

try losing yourself. Try doing something as a congregation that entrusts yourself to God alone—even at the risk of losing it all.

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This invitation to lose ourselves “for Jesus’s sake” is challenging. This is more than losing one’s self for a selfless cause. Rather it is an invitation to relinquish self-centered ambitions, goals, and lifestyles for the way demonstrated by Jesus. Perhaps, it is an invitation to let go of what we hold most uncritically. If we hold ourselves too tightly, it is really hard to give ourselves to the world for Jesus’s sake.

Losing ourselves is trusting that when we give ourselves away, we will somehow find more than we ever expected. Losing ourselves is trusting that the life that we give away will always outweigh our fear of the worst. Losing ourselves is trusting that when we give ourselves away, we will come to find new life.

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Presbyterian minister and writer Fred Buechner once tried capturing Jesus’s sentiment in his own words: “The life you clutch, hoard, guard, and play safe with is in the end a life worth little to anybody, including yourself, and only a life given away for love’s sake is a life worth living.”²

I also like to apply writing advice from Annie Dillard to faith: “One of the things I know about writing [or, faith, I’d suggest] is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now.” (Ironically, I almost saved this quote for another sermon!)³

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We have all lost ourselves in the way Jesus describes at some point in our life. Maybe, it was an opportunity to serve others. Maybe, it was teaching someone else to play an instrument. Maybe it was parenting—or tutoring—or mentoring—or coaching—or the Peace Corps—or justice work. Whatever it may have been—in that moment where you lose yourself—then you realize that you had never been more yourself. Your anxieties—they dissipate. Your insecurities—they vanish. Your gifts—they flourish.

Your idealized notions of who you should be fall apart. The expectations that everyone else has always had for you no longer hold water. You are free to love as you have never loved before. You take a risk that comes more intuitively than you ever expected.

Is that what it is like to follow Jesus? Is it that you get so caught up in a life in service to others, that you lose yourself? You get so swept up in sharing God’s redeeming love, that all of your guards are down. Then, suddenly, without any warning, you discover that you are a part of what God is doing in the world. God is using

us for things we can never imagine on our own. And in that moment, that you are deeply—unequivocally—joyfully—*found*.

You are *found*.

Notes

1. Brooks, David. “It’s Not About You,” *New York Times*, May 30, 2011.
2. Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993.
3. Dillard, Annie, *The Writing Life*. London, Picador, 1990.