

## LOSING LIFE IN ORDER TO GAIN IT

Luke 9: 18-25

I hadn't seen her in a long time. Jessie was a young mom in my former church. She was thoughtful, engaged and was thrilled to have her daughters involved. But after I left and moved on I had heard that she had fallen into trouble. Her eldest daughter had become difficult, reactive, with grades dropping and school being missed. It got so bad that social intervention had to happen and she was hospitalized. If this was not stressful enough, Jessie had also been diagnosed with breast cancer. She had had to undergo surgery and treatments, and things in the household were a mess. Her partner left for a while because it was all too much. This is what I had been told and I hoped that Jessie was getting the support she desperately needed.

So, when I saw her more recently some many years later, I was taken aback. Jessie looked beautiful, luminous, clear, grounded. And this was confirmed for me when I actually spoke to her. What had happened in the last 10 years to have led to such a dramatic transformation? Well, Jessie told me that what had happened to her, rough as it was, was actually a blessing in disguise. "Really", I responded? "It's you saying it Jessie so I have to hear it, but how so?" Well, Jessie told me that her scare with death and her journey toward healing also involved a total re-evaluation of her life and priorities in her life. Not that her life was bad or anything. But she was ambitious about rising up in her working life, getting promoted and building a family life that was focussed on material and social success, with her family playing the part and her daughters reflecting that success in every way. Her husband's value was also in his brilliant mind and contribution in the tech world.

But what happened when it all fell apart? Between her illness, conflict in parenting with her husband and her eldest dropping out of school and leaving her family for a while, she was forced to confront her life. Was she going to get bitter or better? Was the death of her dream to lead to oblivion or to some kind of resurrection into a new life she could never have imagined could be? Well, clearly what I witnessed was a resurrection. Jesse told me her daughter was doing incredibly well, immersed in a graduate program in healthcare and keen to work in marginalized communities outside of larger urban centres. Her other daughter was also thriving. Her partner and she were rebuilding their marriage and she was happier than she'd ever been, focussed on more important things in her life than climbing the corporate ladder. She was healthy inside and out and she was full of hope. She didn't know what tomorrow would bring in terms of her health, her family or life, but she felt with all her heart she was exactly where she should be right now.

Isn't this wonderful? I was totally moved and told her so. She had made my day and more. She gave me hope. Death to resurrection – it's real! It can happen and does happen. But is such a pattern and movement relevant to each and every one of us? Or does it make us feel bad because our lives don't quite reflect this?

Well, let's think about this some more. Stuff has happened, is happening and will happen to every one of us in some way. Is it something external or accidental that happens? Is it health, a job, family, an accident being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Are we innocent or complicit in some way in what happens? Should we have known better, played it safer, been more protective? Does it also involve a breakdown of our mental health or our spirits creating in us a fear, an anxiety, an anger or a depressiveness we have not known before? Sometimes and often times it's a combination of things, no? This is life, and if we are to live life well at whatever stage we're in, young or old, we need to learn how to live the tough stuff so that we can truly celebrate the good stuff. Whatever reason the tough stuff falls on our lap, what lessons may we learn through it all? Is there a special pathway for us to rise up through a kind of dying to something that's been so that something new and different will make our lives richer despite it all? Even if we're not flying high are there ways to manage what we are undergoing and even find meaning and joy in ways we have not anticipated or known before?

Our gospel lesson this morning is an episode in the story of Jesus that appears in some form in all the gospels. It's a mid-point in the story. Something changes dramatically in Jesus and he expresses it in a way that will begin to scare his closest followers.

Before this point Jesus is busy teaching and healing in astonishing ways, and this gives people lots of hope and excitement. Jesus' fame as a powerful healer of physical and mental illness has been spreading. He is being hailed as the possible messiah people have been waiting for, for many generations. Such a messiah could finally liberate them from all the oppression they have suffered since the days of slavery all the way back in Egypt a thousand years ago. The dramatic healings are just the tip of the iceberg of what he can do.

But then, something changes. What is it exactly? Well, the leading authorities of the people, religious and political authorities, see Jesus as a threat to their power and control. They are living the privilege of power by complying with the requirements of the Roman empire. Keep the peace and keep the taxes coming to us Romans and you can have the privilege of power and money for yourselves too. That means any would be messiah who awakens the people to hope and freedom must be put down hard. Jesus is being seen as such a threat and Jesus is becoming aware that he is such a threat. But will Jesus back down? Or will he keep going forward trusting that truth and justice through love rather than violence will be the way?

And what about those who want to follow Jesus and his way? What price will they pay? What will they have to lose? Will it be their very lives? Will they be displaced and have to leave their homes because their families will be in danger? Will they and their families suffer harm? If they are to confess that Jesus is, indeed, the messiah God, what will that mean for them?

Well, Jesus minces no words. He tells them this: "The Son of Humanity must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised."

‘Whoa, ok, hold on... Who said anything about suffering, rejection and death dear Jesus? Everyone is so excited and hopeful with you... People are rising up and beginning to dream again... Why all this gloom and doom?’... We often see what we want to see and don't see what we're afraid to see, no?...

But what is Jesus actually saying? Yes, he is saying that trouble is coming despite all the good things. Trouble is coming and will come. That's the truth, like it or not. But, there's something beyond the trouble. "On the third day" something else will happen.

You see, the third day is not necessarily literal. For Hebrews, the third day is also metaphorical. It's saying that after something has died, after something has been lost, after the trouble has had it's way with us and with life, there is another day on the horizon. But such a third day is not inevitable. You have to choose to walk this path. You have to choose to believe it. You have to choose to keep following me and my way of love courageous in the face of opposition and threat, Jesus is saying. The promise is the steadfast road of love and building relationships of love against all the hate and fear that's been built up, will open a pathway to the divine kingdom. That's my mission now, Jesus is saying. To open a way where there is no way.

If the straight way of healings and teachings doesn't bring everyone on board especially those in power, then we have to make a way through and beyond the trouble, and something even more spectacular may arise out of that. On the third day something new, maybe even better, will arise. Can you believe that? Will you follow me in trust and hope in the power of God's love through me to you? This is what Jesus is saying in effect.

‘Well, we need to know more, Jesus. What will it cost us? And what kind of benefit will there be for us if we're willing to take up our cross of trouble to come?’ Jesus says this: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit them if they gain the whole world but lose or forfeit themselves?" You see, it's all about measuring cost, profit and the value of life differently. If it's all about material and social benefits, health and beauty that are external, then yes, often there will be a cost to pay,

like it or not. But if in that crucifying journey we let certain things go and push them away, and if we begin to re-evaluate the value of things we have valued and see the value of other things we have not seen or appreciated the same before, and if we discover new capacities, energies and passions in us we have not known before, and if we begin to see our old lives as no longer livable because we are now different in so many ways... Well, then, this is resurrection!

And whether it happens in more dramatic ways as happened with Jessie, or more progressive up and down ways over time as happens to some of us as we journey through various things in our lives, the pattern of death to resurrection, of carrying our cross and losing our lives in order to gain a richer, truer and more authentic life is the journey to which we are all called to go in ways particular to our own lives.

And this is exactly what you sign up for every time you take Holy Communion. Did you know that? Jesus said that the bread and the wine of this special meal now is his body and blood, his dying and death. But as we take him in by eating and drinking the symbols of his life in bread and wine, he is to rise up within us so that we are empowered to live into his resurrection life through our own living and loving. Jesus dies in us so that he can rise up through our own hands, feet, voice and heart for each other and in our world. This needs to happen in us again and again. Like food and drink we need to be replenished, refreshed and renewed because life is happening and keeps happening to us and in us. What does Jesus dying and rising again in us mean at this moment and time of our lives? What may we need to die too right now and what may we be given the empowerment to rise up to? How may we bear witness that Christ continues to be alive in the flesh through ordinary people like us who have extraordinary possibilities in us yet to live into more fully?

As you eat and drink today, may you feel Christ rise up in you... As you lose your life may you gain life so much richer and greater despite all that may burden or stress you in life right now... In this life and in the next, resurrection is your destiny as child of God. Let's celebrate!  
Amen.