

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A
2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16A
Psalm 89:2-3, 16-17, 18-19
Romans 6:3-4, 8-11
Matthew 10:37-42
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Our Gospel today is like a magnificent piece of jewelry; let's say a brooch. On the face of the brooch are clustered an array of precious stones -- each of them a saying of our Lord, a many faceted gem, worthy of a lifetime's reflection. Today, I'd like for us to lift just one of those jewels from its setting, and hold it up for a moment to the light.

I'd like us to consider Matthew, chapter 10, verse 39: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Its a beautiful saying, but its meaning isn't immediately obvious. Our Lord is using one of his favorite tactics; he has couched his message in terms that capture the attention of his listeners and give them something to puzzle over. It is a way of overcoming their comfortable assumption that they already know all the answers.

The first clause is particularly mystifying. What can it mean to say, "Whoever finds his life will lose it?" When faced with this kind of enigma, it sometimes helps to look at a different translation. *The New American Bible* gives verse 39 as; "He who seeks only himself brings himself to ruin, whereas he who brings himself to naught for me discovers who he is."

The first clause, "he who seeks only himself brings himself to ruin," might simply mean "spare a thought for other people" -- a warning against being too selfish. But I think there is more here.

We know that life is precious. We all try to get everything we can

out of life. We seek happiness and self-fulfillment. We want to experience every good thing, and reach the limits of our human potential. I think the cult of self-fulfillment tends to be particularly strong in my mid baby boom generation. Our parents told us early on that we were the most important people in the world. And we believed them! Ever since, we've been trying to live lives worthy of our lofty status.

We are interested not so much in owning things, as in acquiring experiences. As a rule, we are more likely to invest in an exotic vacation than in a living room suite. We want to milk life for all it is worth. This attitude often extends to our quest for religious experience. We want spiritual growth commensurate with the personal growth we have achieved in other areas of our life. When we pray, we aspire to the mystical experiences of the great saints.

All of this is perfectly natural, but it's ultimately frustrating. It's like searching frantically for your glasses when all the while they've been hanging around your neck. It's like catching something out of the corner of your eye that's invisible when you stare at it.

Let me attempt another illustration. A wise old woman asks her great-granddaughter to go out in the garden and find the most precious thing there. The girl is very diligent. She gets down on her hands and knees and examines closely every plant in the garden. She finds a dazzling array of flowers, a wide assortment of vegetables, and many rare varieties of fruit. Finally, covered with dirt from head to toe, she settles upon a particularly beautiful apple. She picks it, and brings it to her great-grandmother. The old woman smiles and says, "You have brought me the most precious thing, but it isn't the apple. It is the soil that you've got all over you, because it's the soil that brings forth everything

else in the garden.

I think it's this frustrating inability to see the most precious thing that Jesus is speaking about. Common sense tells us that if we would be fulfilled we must strive for self-fulfillment. But that isn't the way it works. The Christian tradition tells us that ultimately, this world is not our home. We are pilgrims here. Our destiny lies somewhere else. I think this sense of alienation is rooted in the incongruity we've been talking about. The perfectly obvious route to happiness...is an illusion. Anyone who finds his life will lose it. If we seek ourselves, we bring ourselves to ruin.

Which brings us to the second clause: "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it," or "He who brings himself to naught for me will discover who he is." Jesus is saying that we will reach our goal only if we live our lives in direct contradiction to the conventional wisdom about human happiness. We have to ignore all the usual criteria of success, and pour ourselves out for others, and for the Kingdom of God. Whatever we have, we must spend on Christ. And if we are good stewards of our resources, it is only so that we can ultimately spend even more on Christ.

This isn't a reflection about money. I'm talking about *everything*: our time, our intelligence, our *reputation*. (That's what's meant by "the ignominy of the cross.") We have to employ all of our strengths, and even our weakness. And this isn't some austere discipline, some strange asceticism that will only be rewarded in the next life. It's the only way to real happiness *here and now*. Think about it. The happiest people you have ever met were probably the ones most heavily invested in God, and in serving others. If you ever have the privilege of visiting a Carmelite convent or a Cistercian monastery, for example, you will be stunned by the joy you encounter there. And the same degree of holiness that we

find in a monastery can be achieved in every walk of life.

And, of course, in urging us to follow this path, Jesus is merely telling us, “do as I have done.” There used to be a saying, “Don’t talk the talk if you can’t walk the walk.” Jesus walked the walk, and bids us to follow him. When we do, we will find out who we are. We will discover ourselves, beyond ourselves, in God. How’s *that* for self-fulfillment?