

The Proper Perspective

When we decide to go on a trip, especially to a place we haven't been to before, we make a plan. We'll take a look at roadmaps to see the best route to take, we may go online to see if there is any construction along the way. After we see how far it is to our destination, we decide if we are going to stay overnight somewhere, how far we want to go the first day and the like. We also make sure that our vehicle is in good running order, that the tires are inflated properly, the oil is changed, the gas tank is full and all those other things to make sure that we don't have a breakdown. While making those plans, we develop expectations of how the trip will be. Meeting those expectations or not will factor in determining whether or not we had a good trip.

When Lent began 5 weeks ago, what were we expecting? When we began our journey, were we thinking that we would be able to make it on our own? Did we expect that if we gave up something for Lent; that at the end of Lent we would be a better person, a better Christian? There is the belief that we control our own destiny, so to speak. We make all the decisions of where our life goes, what we do, what we don't do; we have the impression that we are in control of our lives, whether as individuals or as a community. If we put forth enough effort, keep working at our spirituality, do enough good works, then we can be the kind of Christian that God wants us to be. While there is some truth to that, the thing that is often neglected or overlooked is the role that God has in our becoming more Christian. The Psalmist recognizes the role that God has and the limited role the Psalmist has in becoming the person God wants them to become. The Psalmist reminds us that it is by God's action that their sins forgiven and they receive salvation. According to Jeremiah the day is coming when we will not have to worry about turning back to God, about needing to have our hearts renewed. There will be the day when we will not only know what to do but we

will also do it. That is when God will not only forgive our sins but also not remember them. That is the day that Jesus ushered in.

The way in which John begins his Gospel account, we get the strong indication that through Jesus, a new creation is being established. Throughout this Gospel account, Jesus talked about change. Of the old being replaced by the new, yet still using part of the old; of a person becoming a new person. He told Nicodemus that a person had to be born anew. Now He talks about losing our life, likening it to a grain of wheat that has to die before it can bear fruit. As is typical in John's Gospel, Jesus' words can sometimes sound confusing, as if He is talking in indecipherable riddles. At times, we may get a fuzzy notion of what Jesus may be talking about; at other times we just shake our heads and say "Huh???" This is because John's Gospel can be understood on different levels. Sometimes, we hear Jesus' words literally and at other times it is clear that Jesus is talking figuratively. There are times, however, when we mix up the literal understanding with the figurative understanding and get confused as to what Jesus is saying. If we are persistent enough and open our hearts to the work of the Holy Spirit, then we can come to an understanding of what Jesus meant.

Today's text is one such text. It is easy to get lost in the finding and losing of one's life. If it is read too fast, it could almost sound like Dr. Suess wrote it. Traditionally, it has been understood to mean that those who are self-centered in this life will not obtain eternal life. If a person is so set on keeping everything they have for themselves and see their stuff as solely 'theirs' then that is all they will have. Their life becomes their stuff. When they die, they will lose everything because, as the saying goes, you can't take it with you. The opposite of this, that is, to 'save one's life' could lead to extreme self-denial, where there is a hyperfocus on the spiritual realm and even a loathing of anything in this physical life.

But what if there was another way to understand the verse? What if it meant that those who do not respect their lives and the lives of others will not be given eternal life? For example, if you are bitter towards others and at life in general, then when you die that is how you will spend your eternal life- bitter. If you love your life, that is if you respect life, treat yourself and others as something of value, then when you die you enter into the glory of God, thereby taking on God's identity, thus losing your life. This may just seem like semantics; putting a positive spin on some harsh words but it actually is more than this. Understanding these words this new way, leads one to embrace life, acting positively, in a way that sees this life as valuable.

This way of looking at this verse is consistent with the Biblical story. God is often described as love, especially in the Gospel of John. The early Christians understood that the center of the Good News of Jesus was grounded in love 'for God so loved the world.' With so many positive connotations about love in the Bible and in the Gospels we should interpret this saying of Jesus in a positive way as well. However, we should be careful that we do not turn this love into love of self so that we become the center of our world and everything revolves around us. When this happens, we exclude others, taking from them whatever we want because of who we think we are. These are the times when we become less Christ-like and embrace the worldly notion of power.

But that is where Lent comes in. Lent is a time when we become reflective of what we have done and confess to those ways in which we have not been Christ-like. Lent is also a time when we recognize our limits on being able to change our ways on our own and acknowledge our need for God's help in making these changes. Acknowledging one's dependence on God does not make a person a mere puppet whose strings are pulled according to the whims of God. What it does, is it admits that there are limits to what we can accomplish and to go beyond those limits requires

someone who is bigger than anything else. Our readings this morning admit to these limits.

By looking at the Gospel from an alternate perspective allows us to embrace life in this world with love and not to try to separate ourselves from the world we live in or the lives that God gave us. As we continue our Lenten journey, may we learn that we can depend on God to create in us a clean heart, a heart that has the Word of God written on it and may we live that way.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/EgGHanCRYTU>

Service: <https://youtu.be/vM-QHIY56EA>