

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Most parents know how real growth takes place in their children. It takes place when there is loss. Take away the training wheels and, eventually, amidst scraped elbows and knees and butterflies in the stomach, the child learns how to ride a two-wheeler. Place the swimming noodle to the side and the child dares to float on her own. So many of the first steps of children require loss before there is gain.

Sometimes we parents accelerate the losing. We say the pacifier (the binkie or whatever) was thrown out in the garbage by accident. My sister-in-law told her daughter Emily, who was two years older than my daughter Sarah, that my Sarah needed the baby bottle Emily clung to, that poor Sarah didn't have any bottles, so Emily needed to give her bottle to her younger cousin. That Sarah actually didn't use a bottle, but was nursed by me did mean that my sister-in-law told a little white lie, but Emily, even at her young age, could understand that she needed to lose the bottle for Sarah's sake.

Often, the gain following the loss can be incredible. The bottle gone, the child can drink from a straw at McDonald's or even from a glass at a fancy restaurant. The pacifier gone, the child can talk clearly and you can see their mouth! The training wheels gone, and the child flies down the street in wild abandon.

Losing to gain. What a novel concept. Yet even adults can discover a richness of life taking such a path. Growth can occur when there is loss. You screw up the courage to tell someone you love them—that means you must lose the defenses normally built to protect one's self against rejection. But if you never tell them you love them, how will you ever know if they love you in return?

Or you go on vacation for several days, and this time you "lose" your Palm Pilot, your laptop, your cell phone; you let that darned crazy schedule go by the wayside, and really, really relax, unwind. Wow—you get reacquainted with your family and friends and the beautiful world around you. What gain!

Jesus teaches his disciples this novel concept. He teaches them that they must lose in order to gain. Jesus, who was walking toward his own certain death in Jerusalem, knows that his loss, his death—and then his eventual resurrection—will bring gain, will bring new life to the world. His willingness to join in our world's suffering will show the world the fullness of his love for all people that they might turn to him. It is a costly loss, it involves pain and sacrifice, yet Jesus accepts it as a way for God's people to grow and live.

And it wasn't just his own loss the teacher from Nazareth was talking about. Not only does he astound and confuse and upset Peter and the other disciples with his prediction of his own suffering and death. But Jesus then goes on to say that anyone who wants to **follow** him will need to lose their life in order to save their life. Jesus says that loss will bring about gain.

Those are scary words. Yet the truth is that many of us insist on clinging to things which keep us from living the way Jesus calls us to live, the way God our creator intended us to live. We have our own pacifiers, if you will, the things which make us feel secure and safe, independent and powerful, attractive and popular. Consider your pacifier for a moment. It might be money—hoarded away and never shared,

or spent willy-nilly because having the latest “thing” seems all-important. It might be a pill that calms us on a stressful day or a drink that boosts confidence when we face a challenge. It might be positioning ourselves in the right group in our community, living in the right neighborhood, owning the right car, joining the right club. Our pacifier might be the hateful words we speak in anger or whisper in gossip, convinced as we are that to speak such things, after all, will make us feel better.

Even our modern-day spirituality can serve as a pacifier. Bishop Mark Hanson, the bishop of our denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, told of a pastor in a rapidly growing non-denominational congregation. This pastor was discussing his sermon topics. This pastor says he preaches about how to reach your financial goals, how to discipline your children, how to invest your money. The pastor said, “If Oprah and Dr. Phil are doing it, why shouldn’t we?” Hanson stated the pastor went on to say that he never talks about being transformed through struggle, surrender or sacrifice. There is never talk about loss, only gain. But it is a superficial gain that he preaches—if I have just the right amount of Jesus in my pocket, I’ll be happy, and life will be grand. And, as I said, that congregation is growing.

The issue at the core of all our pacifiers is our preoccupation with ourselves. And being preoccupied with ourselves, our needs and our wants, means that others’ needs cannot occupy our minds. It also means God’s love can’t occupy our hearts.

*“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 self-denial of which Jesus speaks is not easy to grasp. Even those closest to Jesus, his first disciples, did not fully understand discipleship when they signed on. So we should not be troubled that we have difficulty understanding it. The truth is, the world doesn’t want us to understand it. Losing ourselves is to resist the world’s impulse to self-preoccupation. Losing ourselves is a subversive act against those powers of this world which insist one must always clamor to be number one, fulfill one’s self, reach the top, be part of the elite, at any cost. For a Christian to lose ourselves is to be involved in radical disobedience to the world and its ways, as we are supremely radical in our obedience to our Lord and his ways. We know his ways, and they are peace, humility, compassion, gentleness and love. Jesus blazed the trail for us on this. The cross is perhaps the most radical, subversive act you and I can ever perceive—Jesus dies in utter humiliation at the hands of the world’s powers. And for awhile there it truly looks as if those powers won. Only Jesus was raised from the dead, thus showing the limits, the inherent weakness of those so-called powers. God’s ultimate power is made known. That’s why the cross is so vital an image for us as Christians—we look at it, and see profound loss, yet receive true gain. For through it we are welcomed into God’s life and power.

Taking up our own cross will never be easy. We will be tempted constantly to cling to the things we think matter most for our survival. We will be told, no ifs, ands or buts, that losing ourselves is the wrong way to go, that it doesn’t make sense, that it doesn’t work in our world. And so, for guidance and strength, we ought to talk to those persons who have taken up the cross in their own life. Those people of faith and courage and selflessness are legion—some of them are right here in our congregation, only they are so humble you might not recognize them. I am honored to be one of their pastors, and they have no idea how much they teach and inspire me. But they also can be found throughout our world, living like Christ, and if we listen, we will hear their stories above the roar of the world’s woes, and we will learn from them. They are the people of God, freed by Jesus Christ from preoccupation with themselves, and freed for solidarity with others.

This year marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Albert Schweitzer's death in 1965. The story of his life as a medical doctor in the missionary field of French Equatorial Africa for nearly 50 years is a well-known one to many. His career decision—to choose not a financially-lucrative medical post, but a life of medical ministry to the suffering—was a decision precisely based on these words of Jesus. Schweitzer wrote, “Many a time I tried to settle what meaning lay hidden for me in the saying of Jesus: *Whoever would save their life shall lose it, and whoever shall lose their life for my sake shall save it.*” Schweitzer concluded that the blessings he had been given of a privileged life, loving family, and solid educational opportunities were to be used to care for others. Rather than a preoccupation with self, he occupied his mind and heart with the most poor and needy in the Third World. You see, he lost himself, but Schweitzer himself says there was gain in that loss. He wrote, “In addition to the outward, I now had inward happiness.” Oh, the illogic quality of this novel concept—that when we lose ourselves in the love and service of others, we might actually, finally, find ourselves. May you and I dare to live such loss and receive such gain. **AMEN.**