

“Uplifted”

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

March 21, 2021

I'm bad to lose things, y'all. Believe me, I wish it weren't true but, sadly, it is. When I first came to this church, one of the very first things I told Cheryl was that I lose papers all the time. That if there is anything necessary to keep, she'd better keep it. Keys? Oh, I'm horrible with keys, ask Natalie. In fact, for a while I had a little contraption that linked them to my cell phone via Bluetooth. Ah, but the batteries ran out and, guess what? I lost its replacement. That's why I'm so grateful that Natalie recently put up a key hanger right by the door. When I use it, it's never very hard to find them.

Yes, to be sure, I lose a lot of things.

But my life?

Well, I should think it relatively self-explanatory that I wouldn't want to lose that, right? But what if I would do so, just by loving it? Ah, see, that would be a different story, wouldn't it?

But that's exactly what Jesus teaches us in this morning's reading from the Gospel of John. This morning I read to you from chapter 12, verses 20-26 – “Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So, these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.”

This morning's reading from the Gospel of John follows two very significant events which help clarify its meaning. First, this teaching of Jesus comes soon after he's resurrected Lazarus, one of his friends and the brother of Mary and Martha. Remember how He goes out to the cave and summons Lazarus. That's he's been dead over 3 days and probably stinks makes no difference. Jesus calls Lazarus and he emerges from his tomb, ready to live yet again. Interestingly, it's this act, this raising of Lazarus from the dead which draws the intense scrutiny of the religious leaders of the time. In fact, for bringing Lazarus back to life, the religious authorities begin to actively plot to kill Jesus.

The other factor to keep in mind when coming into this particular reading in the Gospel of John is that it occurs immediately following Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. That is to say that John's Palm Sunday festivities precede this. And it's there that we hear the Pharisee's lament that “the whole world” has gone after Jesus.

Which is shown immediately to be true as some Greeks are said to have come to “See” him.

What Jesus was doing there in Judah was making the world take notice. Among those, Greeks (Gentiles) who were devoted to God. They'd heard the stories about Jesus, the healings, the resurrection, and they come to meet Him. Makes sense, right?

But Jesus' answer to their request? Doesn't make sense, not at first it doesn't, that's for sure. He begins by stating that “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Like, I wonder what Andrew and Phillip thought of that response. My guess is that they definitely weren't expecting what Jesus shared with them. After all, they were probably looking for something like, “hey, show them in” not, the whole thing about a grain of wheat dying to bear great fruit.

But that's not the end to the odd things Jesus is going to say. Because following this, Jesus states that “whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

He says it another way in Luke 9:23-24 – “And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

This, very clearly, is a bit of a paradox.

Now, what is a paradox?

Paradox is defined as, “a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true.”

A great example of a paradox is “you’ve got to spend money to make money” or “youth is wasted on the young” or perhaps Oscar Wilde’s paradox – “I can resist anything but temptation.” True statements but awful difficult to reconcile along traditional means.

Now, believe it or not, Jesus represents a bit of a paradox. God and Man?

Dead and Alive? Here and not here? And he says a lot of things that are paradoxical, **Matthew 7:13-14** – “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” But then, in **Matthew 11:28-30** we hear this, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

But here we see another obvious example. Jesus tells us that to love our lives is a surefire way to lose them while hating our lives is a certain way to ensure eternal life. These statements, at first, strike us as unreasonable, nonsensical even. After all, if we hate our lives, why in the world would we want to see them continue into eternity?

What Jesus is pointing us to is a deep truth that, although difficult to grasp at first, once understood it can serve as the triumphal archway into a new plane of existence.

Now, let me dispel some potential misconceptions. First, loving one’s life the way the passage intends it is not a good thing. Now look, I think as Christians we are all called upon to be grateful for this thing called life. What Jesus is talking about here is more about living for self than anything else. When Jesus condemns “loving your life” He’s not talking about enjoyment of it, He’s talking about self-absorption. As in, to love your life so much that you end up missing the point, entirely.

Now look, in some very real ways, I’m grateful that my growing up stage in this life occurred long before the advent of social media. Goodness only knows what would be forever circulating on the internet of me were it not for that fortunate occurrence. Social media sure has changed a lot of things. Take, for example, the next time you’re at someplace special, like a waterfall or, I don’t know, in front of the Mona Lisa or something. Well, back when I was a kid, you’d just marvel at the site. Or, perhaps, if you brought a camera, you’d take a picture, a way to remember the moment.

Nowadays, however, it isn’t enough JUST to have a picture, it’s got to be a picture...with ME in it. Yes, the selfie exposes for us just how self-obsessive our generation is these days. I can’t help but confess that whenever I hear Jesus say that “if you love life” you’ll lose it I tend to think about those poor folks who actually died taking selfies. Like got too far out on a cliff or close to a wild animal. In love with their lives, these people took unfortunate chances and would up dead. Did they deserve it? Of course not. Does it help us understand what Jesus is saying? Absolutely.

In some ways, promoting self-obsession is the great aim of all advertising and marketing departments. After all, how am I going to get you to spend \$20 on my luxe shampoo unless I first convince you that you’re “worth it.”

We can trace this impulse back a long way, philosophically at least. You see, for generations, it was assumed that there was an objective world. Basically put, this meant that I was just one creature here among many. That, for example, it didn’t matter what I thought of a hill or a tree, because the hill or the tree would be there regardless.

Kant changed all of that. In the 18th century, Immanuel Kant rewired philosophy from the objective to the subjective. For example, under Kant’s epistemological framework, a hill is only a hill because I can see it and give it a name. If it were not for me, that hill wouldn’t be a hill.

It’s an interesting philosophy but it’s also one that took over the world. One might rightly argue were it not for Kant, there might not be an America or a constitution so you’ve got to take the good with the bad. And there certainly is some bad. Being so self-obsessed is a natural byproduct of believing in some very tangible ways that the world revolves around us.

In fact, our self-absorption has even made it into the world of religious ideas.

In his work, “Dispirited: How Contemporary Spirituality Makes Us Stupid, Selfish and Unhappy” author David Webster teases out for us how typical “new age, spiritual but not religious” thinking has warped us. In fact, Webster’s take on how many of these same dispirited traits have worked their way into Christian thought is a bit depressing, to be honest about it.

See, when we make ourselves the focal point of anything, things are bound to head south from there. And this is one of the clear cases that science buttresses our Christian belief. Time after time, study after study shows us clearly that living life for oneself is a sure-fire way to end up miserable and alone.

But if that’s what it means to love one’s life, how does one, in turn, hate one’s life. Again, keep in mind, this isn’t a call to live life on a joyless basis. No, far from it. It is instead a way to reframe our lives along the lines of the way they were created to begin with.

Jesus came to serve – that shows us the very nature of how to live. Living for Himself is not what Jesus did. Instead, He came to live for others and His life is eternal. That should give us some clue on how we can make ours equally so by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Ways to hate your life

1. Change your thoughts – Romans 12:1-2 – “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.
 - a. Bible, worship
2. Change your actions – Romans 6:15-18 – “What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.
 - a. Service to others, self-denial

Close with Uncle Charles

- A man who, by all accounts, didn’t have much of a life, but did...

Scripture and Quotes

John 12:20-26 – *“Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.’”*

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C.S. Lewis (Mere Christianity) – *“‘Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.’”*

Galatians 2:20 – *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*