



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Third Sunday after Pentecost: June 21, 2020

Sermon Title: “Losing and Finding”

Gospel Text: Matthew 10:24-39

This Father’s Day I can’t help thinking about Father’s Day 1997. I wasn’t yet a dad. But our daughter was due to be born at any moment. And so I spent the day nervously pacing and awaiting a phone call – a call we hoped would confirm that a healthy, happy baby girl had been born and that after so many years of disappointments and delays, my wife and I could finally make plans to travel across the country and adopt this child we’d been praying to receive for so many years.

But the phone never rang that day. In fact, it would be a few more weeks until she was born, because (as usual) she insisted on being fashionably late. Our anticipation continued to grow. Even before she was born, we loved that little baby girl with a love we didn’t think possible. When the call finally *did* come, I was on the road for business and had just stopped for supper. I got so excited and flustered that I ended up locking my keys in my car. I don’t know what it cost me to call a locksmith, but I didn’t care. I was going to be a dad!

There were some minor complications at birth, and then a few second thoughts on the part of the birth parents that threatened to derail things, but by that point there was no way we could ever contain the love we had for that little baby or the desire we had to be parents. Finally, a week after her birth, three thousand miles from home, we held her for the first time. In that moment of joy, all the tears we had shed and all the frustrations we had felt over all the miscarriages and failed adoptions were healed. I was a dad! And there was no greater feeling in the world.

Little did I realize that there would be many more tears and frustrations to come. Our bright, strong-willed redhead would test our patience more than once. And when she suffered a devastating injury, I think I felt the pain as much or more than she did. There is no greater agony than seeing your child suffer. But that’s as big a part of parenting as the happy times of honor rolls, graduations, engagements, and weddings.

In a moment of reflection, I’ve sometimes wondered if I’d do it all over again, knowing now the full rollercoaster of ups and downs of parenthood that, as a brand new dad, I never could’ve fully anticipated. Have *you* ever wondered that? If you could do it all again – the good times, the bad times, the celebrations, the sleepless nights - would you? I sure would. But I suppose that’s easy to say because I know now how the story unfolds.

But for the apostles in today’s Gospel, it was different. They still had no idea what the true cost of following Jesus would be, or how *their* story or *his* story would end. It’s not like

Jesus tried to hide the cost of discipleship from them. For example, in today's Gospel Jesus had just finished gathering the twelve and was preparing to send them out into the world. He wasn't a salesman serving up an enviable opportunity, or an executive recruiter offering a rose-colored assessment of a prosperous career, an ideal workplace, and luxurious working conditions. Instead, he was starkly blunt with them about what it would mean for them to follow his Way. Here, in summary form, is what Jesus told them:

1. You've heard the names they call me. It's going to get even uglier. You will see me suffer some truly horrible things. And if they can do that to *me*, just think what they'll be willing to do to *you*.
2. Conflict is inevitable. Yes, some will hear my message as Good News. But many others will reject it and be offended by *it* and by *you*. Entire families will fracture over me.
3. Your work will be like bearing a cross. Yes, a cross – the very thing the Romans use to terrorize us and kill us as slowly and painfully as possible. The cross will symbolize the *cost* of this work. And for most of you, it will become more than just a symbol – it will become *reality*.

So, knowing all of this, why did the apostles stick with Jesus? Why didn't they race back to their fishing nets and their old lives that may have been boring but surely offered a longer life expectancy? Similarly, why do people enter into relationships as parents, spouses, friends, and caregivers – relationships that will inevitably require self-sacrifice – relationships that are as likely to bring pain as joy? What could possibly motivate any sane human being to take risks like that?

The answer is as simple as it is profound. *Love*. It's love that moved God to take on flesh and willingly exchange a heavenly throne for a crown of thorns. And it's love that binds us into relationships with *one another* and with *God* even when we know the inherent risks. This is what Jesus describes when he says: "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Look, there's no denying that Jesus's way of love demands much of us. Jesus modeled this for us as he quite literally poured his life out for us, purely out of love. He knew that his love has the power to transform hearts. There's no better example than the apostles themselves. That flawed and sometimes even bumbling group of misfits who regularly failed Jesus, who generally misunderstood his mission and identity, and who abandoned him at his hour of greatest need would be transformed by his cross and resurrection into lions of the faith who would boldly and fearlessly proclaim the Good News far and wide, sacrificially love and serve all people, and even give their own lives in the service of God and neighbor.

It wasn't their intellectual brilliance, extraordinary bravery, or heroic faith that enabled them to do this. They did it because Christ's love had chipped away at their stony, sinful hearts like a skilled sculptor, only to reveal in each of them a work of sublime beauty – the person God created them to be – their true, holy selves – a work of art that only their creator could know was hidden beneath all those layers. They lost something for Christ's sake, but in that process, what was uncovered were the very things they'd been seeking: meaning, purpose, and wholeness. Again, as Jesus says: "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Friends, we're like ships in briny water. The barnacles of sins such as fear, selfishness, greed, and bias have formed a crust around us that has distorted our identity and diverted our journey. But Jesus's love for us has never abated. He sees us not merely as what we *are* but as what we can *be*. That's why, despite our brokenness, he has entrusted each of us with holy work. At its core that work is to love: a love that has the power to change both us *and* the world; a love that Jesus calls us to share not only with our friends and family but even our enemies, no matter the cost. It's only possible because Jesus first loves us with a love that transforms us by chipping away at *our* stony hearts to reveal something shockingly beautiful and sacred.

Twenty-three years ago I took a risk on love, not truly understanding either the cost I would bear or the transformation I would experience. It is just one small part of a much larger transformation that Jesus is working in this flawed servant of his, one who is still very much a work in progress. Love is the *process*. Love is the *journey*. Love is the *destination*. Love is the *call*... for me, for you, for all of us. Believe me – I get it. Allowing yourself to love and be loved is *scary*. It leaves us *vulnerable*. But trust Jesus. Surrender yourself to his love. Lose your present life for his sake. In doing so you will find the *real life* you were made to experience. You will find your *true purpose*. You will find your *true self*. Amen.