

## Sermon by Christopher Girata

Luke 9:18-24  
(Proper 7 - Year C)  
24 June 2007

From our Gospel lesson, Jesus tells his disciples that those who want to become his followers must “take up their cross daily,” for “those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” Those of us who choose to deny ourselves, who choose to lose our lives, will actually save them, says Jesus. We lose to gain. But what do we lose, and what is actually gained? In essence, Jesus is talking about transformation. Jesus says that through loss, through pain, and through suffering, we find our true lives... we are literally saved from our worldly lives and remade in relationship to God. By denying ourselves and living into Christ’s example, even if we encounter difficulty in the world, we will manifest the love of God and by doing that, we will be transformed into new life.

Transformation can affect anyone, and that change can manifest in many different ways, even when we least expect change to come. One of the great French Impressionists, Pierre-Auguste Renoir began his life in a poor, working-class family. His first job was as a teenager, painting small porcelain trinkets in a Paris factory. In the factory, working to help support his family, he developed his understanding of color and light that led to his impressionist style. Having been raised in a poor family, Renoir knew the difficulties of life, yet he loved the beauty of the world. He loved the beauty of nature and the beauty of people, both common subjects in his paintings. After years of struggle and study, Renoir’s renown began to grow. Soon his paintings were being shown in many of the major European galleries. Renoir’s art was known for supreme beauty. He was even criticized for his beautiful images as not being “serious art.” Renoir once rebutted a critic by asking, “There are already so many unpleasant things in the world, why shouldn’t art be beautiful?” Renoir’s career was spent in an attempt to transform the pain of his daily life into the beauty of his art.

Like Renoir’s life, our lives are not always beautiful, yet out of our struggles we can manifest beauty in the world. Our gospel lesson finds Jesus dealing with a part of his life

that is far from beautiful, predicting the suffering he will have to undergo in order to live out God's purpose. Jesus knows that his sacrifice, his struggle, his loss will serve to bring all humanity into a deeper relationship with God. In this passage, Jesus names his loss and gain - he will lose *and* gain his physical life. However, when he turns to instruct his disciples, Jesus clearly does not focus on just their physical lives, he addresses the way they *live* their lives, too. Jesus tells them that they can deny themselves and that in that denial, in that loss, they will save their lives. The disciples, just like us, can make a choice. They can choose whether they will live their lives to their own ends, seeking only personal gain, or they can choose to give up all of their self-centered goals for the good of the world. If we choose to serve God and creation over ourselves, if we choose to follow Jesus, then we will become vessels of his transformative power in the world. But what would that choice look like? What can we do *now* to serve God and one another?

There is such a desperate need for us to help one another. Around the corner and around the world, our brothers and sisters struggle every day. News from war torn and oppressed regions of the world, such as the African continent, for example, is widespread. Knowledge of the horrible events taking place in Africa has become a part of our common social conscience. I dare say that not one of us in this room is unfamiliar with many of the tragedies taking place in Africa. Our gospel lesson teaches us to put others before ourselves and compels us to seek justice on behalf of those too weak to defend themselves. But how many of us are doing anything like that? How many of us are truly giving up ourselves in order to show love to those in need? Perhaps we donate money. Perhaps we buy mosquito nets or sponsor a child who does not have enough food to eat. Perhaps we even believe that by doing those charitable acts we are denying our personal ambitions in order to love and serve our brothers and sisters in need. But are we really giving up ourselves, really *losing our lives* to love our neighbors? Or are we simply offering enough to uphold the social status quo?

There is a story told of a young boy named Thomas whose older brother was in a car accident. Thomas' father approached Thomas shortly after the crash and said, "Thomas, your older brother needs a blood transfusion in order to live. The doctors have determined that only you can provide the blood he needs. Are you willing to donate your blood to

your brother so that he may live?" Thomas did not hesitate to answer yes; he would indeed help his older brother, even though he did not know much about the procedure.

On the way to the hospital, Thomas, a normally talkative boy, sat in silence. His father, concerned for his other son, thought it best to leave Thomas to his own thoughts. As they entered the hospital, a nurse greeted them with a smile and a needle in her hand. She told Thomas how courageous he was as she prepared his right arm and carefully inserted the needle. Slowly, the collection bag began to fill with the young boy's blood. After the bag had filled, Thomas, with tears in his eyes, turned to his father and asked, "Daddy, how many more minutes do I have now before I die?"

Our gospel lesson says that *we lose our lives to save them*. We can fully give ourselves over to the love of Christ, to the love of our neighbors, in order to receive true life. Completely giving ourselves over to God may be painful. Yet our willingness to trust God and push through that pain on behalf of others proves that we have truly given ourselves away. Only when we honestly give of ourselves can we know the transformative power of Christ's love.

Near the end of his life, Renoir developed severe arthritis in his hands. In order to help relieve the pain, Renoir moved to the warmer climate of the south of France. But by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Renoir's arthritis had nearly crippled his hands completely. Despite being confined to a wheelchair and without the full use of his hands, Renoir continued to paint through the pain. One day, his old friend, fellow artist Henri Matisse, visited him. As Matisse sadly watched Renoir paint with only the tips of his fingers, clearly aching, Matisse finally asked why Renoir continued to paint through such pain. Renoir turned to look at his friend and replied, "The pain passes, but the beauty remains."

Losing ourselves is hard, and may even be painful. Yet our loss brings us closer to the beauty that is in Christ. Today, we can find ourselves in Christ, and bear God's beauty in the world. Amen.