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# Losing It



A Sermon By  
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

September 16, 2018  
The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2018-09-16-AWW.mp3>.

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As many of you know, all summer long we had a preaching series called, *Characters of the Bible*, and every Sunday, Rev. Amanda, Rev. Richard, or I would speak about one or more of the important figures from the Bible, some of whom were well known and some of whom were not so well known.

For my last sermon in the series, I talked about the disciple, Peter, and the Gospel story I chose for that Sunday was the same Gospel story we just heard. So, you can imagine my reaction when I opened my Bible to prepare for today: "Oh God, it's the same passage. I just preached on this a month ago."

But, then, I thought: "Well, I could give the same sermon. (It would almost be a test to see who was here that Sunday!)"

This passage from Mark comes at almost the exact midpoint of the Gospel. Jesus and his disciples have been travelling all over Galilee as Jesus went about his ministry, preaching and teaching, and now, they have arrived at Caesarea Philippi, about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, when out of the blue, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

"Some say John the Baptist" the disciples reply," and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

"But who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks.

And, in that moment, with such a big question lingering in the air, somehow, the disciple Peter just knew. He knew Jesus was not some fly-by-night preacher and miracle-worker, running around the countryside like so many others at the time. Jesus was different. Jesus was special, and somewhere, deep in his heart, Peter knew it: "You are the Messiah!" he cried out.

It was a pretty bold statement at the time, even for Peter, who was always speaking up and speaking out. To the Jewish people, the idea of a Messiah referred to their sacred history, and tradition, and to the promise of a divinely anointed savior, someone who would reestablish Israel's supremacy among the nations and usher in a new era of peace and righteousness. And so, for Peter to make that claim about Jesus, to be the first person to say, "You're the Messiah! You're the Christ! I see it in you!" it was a really big deal.

But, in that moment, Peter was sure. He had been with Jesus from the beginning, heard what Jesus said, seen what Jesus had done, and he was convinced Jesus was the One the Jewish people had been waiting for. Therefore, when Jesus began teaching the disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed, and after three days rise again, Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Hadn't Jesus been listening to what Peter just said? Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior, the One who would deliver the people of Israel. He couldn't be rejected and killed. There was no way. It wasn't possible. It didn't make sense.

Peter couldn't understand what Jesus was saying, because Peter was so set in his understanding of what the Messiah was and what the Messiah would look like. Peter had this view that had been shaped over the course of his life, and he was just so sure of himself, so certain in his belief, that he wasn't open to any other interpretation or possibility. It didn't matter what Jesus was saying, or the fact that it was Jesus himself who was saying it. Peter knew that he was right. He was positive – POSITIVE! Jesus was the Messiah, and the Messiah couldn't be rejected and killed. That's all there was to it. It was as simple as that. Jesus must have had it wrong.

Peter is no different than the rest of us. Over the course of our lives, we all develop certain convictions and beliefs, and once we do, we hold on to them like crazy, sure that we have it all right, that we have things all figured out. Even when presented with rational arguments and facts that might contradict our own views, we still cling to what we believe; we stick with our convictions, disregarding the opposing facts, dismissing the contrary arguments, or just plain disagreeing with the other people.

Psychologists have all sorts of terms for this: "motivated reasoning," "confirmation bias," "cognitive dissonance." But, the bottom line is: we don't like to change our mind. We're all so stubborn about it. We don't like to change our mind about people, or politics, issues, theology, even about God.

Not long ago, I was at a retreat with other clergy, and as we began one of our guided meditations, our retreat leader asked: When was the last time God changed your mind.

I thought about that question for a while and a few occasions did come to mind. The big one, of course, the most obvious one, was the whole trajectory of my vocational life. As many of you know, I grew up with a strong sense of what I wanted to do with my life, and as I finished college and grad school, I was still very certain of the direction I would go. In my mind, I had this career all mapped out. Susan and I had a life all mapped out. But then, God said, "I have a different idea."

And, we wrestled with that. We struggled with God's idea for a long time, years really, until we finally realized: God was right.

Changing our mind is difficult. Even when God is prompting us to change our mind, it's still difficult, and that's why we don't do it very often. Changing our mind means giving something up: an old way of thinking, an old way of seeing. It means letting something die: some conviction, some belief, maybe even one we've been clinging to for a while; and, it doesn't matter who we are, how strong you are, how brave you are, how willing you are to embrace change, it's hard to do that. It's hard to let something die, especially some part of yourself.

Jesus said, "'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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'

You may be familiar with some of those words, particularly some of the words from that first sentence: "deny yourself;" "take up your cross." We often hear people say those kinds of things, when talking about how hard it is to follow Jesus.

But, the point Jesus was really trying to make, I believe, comes in the second sentence: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Right there, in just those few words, we get to the heart of the Gospel and what means to be a Christian: *Those who lose their life... will save it.*

For Jesus, those words were literally true, as he gave up his life and got it back again. God gave Jesus new life through the resurrection.

For us, it means giving up our old way of life, our old way of thinking, our old way of seeing, and living in a new way, living as Jesus did. That includes letting go of some idea, some conviction, some belief that we've been holding onto, and turning ourselves toward God, what God thinks and what God believes. It's about setting our mind on divine things not on human things. And, that implies we have to change our mind. At some point in our lives, we have to change our minds, about a person, a political issue, something big in our lives. We have to be open to the new possibilities God is putting in front of us...

When was the last time God changed your mind?

Maybe, the time is now... to let go, to lose your life. And, to find it again.

Amen.