

It was just a moment earlier that Peter had said the most beautiful thing: you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!

But then Peter failed and it was epic. So bad that Jesus called him Satan in front of everyone. It was when Jesus said that He must suffer and die and rise again.

And that causes Peter to rebuke Jesus, can you imagine? So Peter goes from great confession about Jesus to spokesman for the devil in the next breath. This is real life - sinful sinner at the same time as forgiven saint.

There's this idea about Christianity - that it is constant upward progress. Essentially self help that eventually gets the sinner in you to almost not show up.

But that's not what Jesus says. He isn't asking us for a little commitment or forward progress. He's asking us to give up our lives. **For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.**

You know the term narcissist - someone who is fixated on themselves, in love with themselves. It comes from an ancient Greek myth about a man named Narcissus who was never supposed to see himself because he was too beautiful. The legend has it that once while he was hunting he went to a pool of water to get a drink and saw his reflection and it was so beautiful he fell in love with his own reflection. And there are various versions of the story but my favorite is that he went to get a drink and it rippled the water and messed up the beautiful face and so he wouldn't touch the water anymore and died of thirst. He died of self love.

It's a strange example, I know, but the point is, he died trying to save himself.

And this is our natural disposition: self preservation. And we'd like to think we're in control of that. As sinners, we'll do an awful lot not to "lose our lives". We've trampled people in love for ourselves and our lives. Neglected family to be the star at work, just went with it because everyone was doing it, threw someone else under the bus to protect ourselves, told a little lie because we were worried what someone would think of us. (Thanks, Pr Smith)

There are two ways we can stand before God. Free or imprisoned.

Imagine if you will, two men standing before a judge. One is a convicted criminal, he's got handcuffs and chains on his legs. He's going nowhere, except back to prison. The other man is free as a bird...except, that he has to remain in good standing, the judge has to get good reports about the man and he has to check in regularly with the judge and do a few good things around the community, or else he too could end up in prison.

Is that free man really free? Here's the funny thing, when standing before God starts in freedom, as though you have the power to make the choice to follow him and you do things right and he accepts you...is that freedom? When it starts with freedom, it ends in slavery. When is it enough? And it becomes about self-preservation and it is constraining! Do this and do that. You have to love yourself the most to prove yourself worthy.

But let's imagine the other man, the one in chains. Suppose he died that same day that he stood before the judge. He would actually be free, wouldn't he? He would owe nothing to no one anymore. Suppose he came back to life but as far as the judge was concerned, he was dead. He would really be free - with nothing to prove. When it starts with bondage, it ends in freedom.

The thing is, ask that guy standing there in chains before the judge if he is okay with dying this afternoon. No way, that sounds awful. He will go for self-preservation, saving his life at all costs. Maybe we could just go with cutting off an arm or a leg - would that work to set me free? But it wouldn't.

There are these two ways to stand before God - thinking you're free or realizing you're imprisoned. This is the call from Jesus - lose it, lose your life, to gain life.

But the old sinful flesh, thinking it's really free, says - I'm actually doing pretty well. And next time I'm going to try harder anyone. It's so addicted to proving itself that it can't see its only hurting itself. As someone said, nothing shows our lack of freedom so clearly as our addiction to control.

But then there is the cross. First, the cross of Jesus, where He lost His life to gain life for us. This is the cross that saves. This is the cross that frees. In that cross on Calvary, Jesus has died your death. It is all over, sin paid for, finished between you and God. You have nothing to prove, nothing more to give, because Jesus has done it. And the fact that there is nothing left for you to do before God IS the death of your old self and new birth into a new life. You died WITH Him when you were baptized, says St. Paul, and now you live, a new and free life. All by His cross.

And what is left? The crosses that are sent from Jesus to you. And these are painful, but they are actually, though you can only grasp this by listening to him, these are actually crosses of His love, meant to heal us, not to hurt us, meant to draw us always back to His cross, where we receive His life again and again.

St Peter and the others were called to be disciples. And they gave up some things they controlled - like fishing or tax collecting. Just like you and I do - we give up some thing in love for Jesus.

But the cross Jesus sends is not something we pick or control. Nor is it a gentle commitment, or just losing an arm or leg, or a plan of self-improvement. It is losing your life...that's more like being led somewhere you don't want to go. It's like losing your control.

That's more like Peter having everything in him say this can't be right so that he blurts out, from the devil apparently, that this shall never happen to you Lord! Losing your life takes Peter to a place where he didn't have enough left to stay away in the Garden when Jesus asked him to, where he didn't have enough courage left not to deny Jesus when they pressed him. A loss of control, losing his life, nothing to hold on to anymore.

And there, broken, is where Peter sees Jesus is still holding on to him.

You carry crosses. More will come. And they take you places you don't want to go. But trust Him, He is loosing your chains as He draws you back to His cross, that place of death for Him, but place of life for you. All He wants you to lose in the end is your sin and death.

Peter failed. But Jesus did not fail him. And Peter's failures were not wasted. They broke his love of control. They caused him to love Jesus in deeper way - in a loss of himself for the love of Christ and His gospel. On the third day, Peter ran to the tomb. The cross of grace gave him life and hope and strength.

Jesus went to the cross, but then Jesus rose in victory. And that is the promise for you, after the crosses, there is victory.

It probably takes a lifetime or two to wrap our minds around this. Where we feel death and loss, God is present with life and blessing. In dying to ourselves we live in Jesus. When it starts in dying, it ends in real living.

How? Just letting down our guard in repentance and honesty before God and each other. Just letting grace be grace. Just letting the Son of God love you, the actual "you" with all the history and all the hurt you carry and all the pretending stripped away. Just seeing that no matter the crosses you carry and the places He leads you and the way it hurts sometimes, he's holding on to you. The actual you. He loves you to death. Amen