

**LIFE: LOSING, GAINING, & LIVING**

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**Matthew 16:21-28**

In his memoir, **The Good Times**, former New York Times correspondent, Russell Baker remembers his mother in a way that made me smile. She has been gone for years, but his mother still roams free in his head and wakes him in the early morning before daybreak. “If there is one thing I can’t stand, Russell, is a quitter,” she says. Russell protests, “but mother, I’m not a child anymore. I have made something of myself. I’m entitled to sleep late.” “Russell,” she responds, “You’ve got no more gumption than a bump on a log. Don’t you want to amount to something?”

Baker remembers when he was assigned to cover the White House--as close to heaven as a correspondent could get. At 29, he was puffed up with pride and went to see his mother, relishing the prospect of her approval and delight. He should have known better.

“Well, Russ,” she said, “If you work hard at this White House job, you might be able to make something of yourself!”

“Make something of yourself.” “Amount to something.” “Be a success.” We all hope to make something of ourselves some day. We all want to be successful and we certainly want our children and grandchildren to be a success. When my husband, Kyle and I feel that our 13 year old son and nine year old daughter are not getting the grades they are capable of in school, we often resort to the parenting techniques I learned twenty years ago from Robert and Stephanie Rhode. When Jason, Katie and Nick Rhode, three genius level children, did not bring home the grades their parents knew they could receive, they had to write several times, “Do you want fries with that burger.”

In the Gospel reading for today, we are given a new definition of success from the teachings of Jesus; it is a definition of success that goes completely against what we have been taught and is certainly nothing like what we hope for our children. John Buchanan, a Presbyterian minister at The Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago says that Jesus’ remarks are a very critical turning point in his life and ministry. He says, “Jesus taught his followers to live in the world with a new set of rules, with a new vocabulary, with new definitions for common words and concepts. Jesus called this alternative reality the kingdom of God, and he said it was present on earth when ordinary people, like them and

like us, live it out. Jesus was not opposed to success. In fact, Jesus called his followers to a rigorous life of hard work and selfless devotion and self-sacrifice. He called his men and women to be successful by a different definition: by giving life away, by dying a little, by serving others, humbly, faithfully, and selflessly.”

Does serving others and finding ways to giving our lives away really work in the real world? Can we live by Jesus definition of success at school, at home or in the business world? The leadership team at my place of work is soon being required to read a book about servant leadership and I certainly hope it is something that they can put to use. When I Googled “servant leadership” last night, I found ten characteristics that described the essence of a servant leader: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others and building community. Who would not want to work in such a wonderful environment? What company would not thrive if their leaders truly served the people they managed?

As some of you might guess, I do not work very well in an authoritarian environment where people are simply given demands and not allowed to be part of the decision-making process. Last year I was assigned a new boss who is in his late sixties and used

to managing people who punch a time clock and do what he says without question. It did not take long for sparks to fly between us and during a staff meeting, it was reported that my now former boss turned many shades of red and purple and in an exasperated state of being blurted out, “That woman, (me!) does not take orders very well!” I know you all must find this very hard to believe!

James Autry, former CEO of the Meredith Corporation who wrote a book a few years ago, entitled, **Love and Profit**, thinks it is possible to live by Jesus’ definitions of success in today’s world. Autry said he remembers sitting in a sales meeting led by a very aggressive, in-your-face sales manager who said, “This is a war. It’s about beating the competition.” I’m into winning, so lets’ get out there and kick a little (you know what)!” Autry believes that good, successful management is about love. “If you don’t care about people, get out of management before it is too late. Save yourself a heart attack and save many people a lot of daily grief.” Autry suggests that the Vice President for Human Resources in a successful corporation, should be renamed the Vice President for Caring. “Good management begins with caring about, listening to, paying attention to, and serving the people you are trying to manage. Successful managers remember birthdays, know about

weddings and the birth of children, and truly serve the individuals they are managing.”

One of the things I believe Jesus is saying to us in this passage is that to follow him means to learn how nurture life in others. If we want to live our lives fully and faithfully, (which is a very legitimate aspiration) then we have to learn how best to give life away. One of the most helpful passages I have ever read about this matter of denying self and giving life away and taking up crosses is by Lamar Williamson in the **Interpretations** Commentary. He said, “the woman who dedicates her life to raising children in need of a home, the man whose devotion to a mentally ill wife is quiet and steady, (the college student who volunteers at the local Boy’s and Girl’s club three evenings a week tutoring at risk children) and the youth whose civil disobedience for conscience sake leads to prison or exile; these are the countless thousands who, through the centuries and in many contexts, have interpreted this text in their lives.”

And Jesus said, “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for

my sake will save it.” And then he asked, “What will it profit for them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

In the spring of 2005, Steve Jobs delivered an amazing commencement speech at Stanford University which you can read in it's complete form if you Google, Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs is the founder of Apple Computers and the infamous iPod and iPhone and Steve Jobs is a hugely successful entrepreneur. Steve Jobs told the Stanford graduates that in 2004, in a routine physical exam, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and was told to go home and get his affairs in order. A subsequent biopsy revealed that his cancer was surprisingly treatable. He had the recommended surgery and is fine now, but different, with a whole new notion of what success is.

Steve Jobs said that he looks in the mirror every day and asks, “If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today? Whenever the answer is ‘no’ for too many days I know I have to change something. Remembering I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make big choices in life. Because almost everything---all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure---these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is

important.” No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it and that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of Life. Death is Life’s change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Your time is limited, Steve Jobs declared, don’t waste it.”

The gift of a potentially fatal disease reminds us in humbling ways that life is really not about us and that whatever the length of life we are given, our days on this earth are brief and we must not waste our precious time or resources. In a sermon entitled, **Risking Life**, (From her book, **The Seeds of Heaven**, pgs. 75-81) the Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor comes to some difficult understandings when she says, “There is a certain amount of pain involved in being human, and a good bit more involved in being fully human, fully alive, especially in a world that counts on our fear of death and uses it to keep us in line.”

She says, “I have come to realize that God does not really care about our comfort and safety. God does not care whether we are happy or not. What God cares about, with all the power of God’s holy being, is the quality of our lives. Not just the continuation of

our breath and the health of our cells, but the quality of our lives--- the depth of our lives, the scope of our lives, and the heft and zest of our lives. The deep secret of Jesus' hard words to us in this passage is that our fear of suffering and death robs us of life, because fear of death always turns into fear of life, into a stingy, cautious way of living that is not really living at all. The deep secret of Jesus' hard words is that the way to have abundant life is not to save it but to spend it, to give it away, because life cannot be shut up and saved any more than a bird can be put in a shoebox and stored on a closet shelf.”

Barbara Brown Taylor concludes her sermon by saying, “To be where God is---to follow Jesus---means going beyond the limits of our own comfort and safety. It means receiving our lives as gifts instead of guarding them as our own possession. It means sharing the life we have been given instead of bottling it for our own consumption.” Albert Schweitzer once said, “I don't know what your destiny will be, but this much I know, the richest and most successful among you will be the ones who find a way to serve.”

As we know, there are many things about us that are predetermined---the color of our eyes, our time and place in history, who our parents are and what our innate abilities are.

(John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, 9/3/03)

Although much of who we are is already set in stone, whom we choose to become and what we choose to do with the gifts of our lives is hugely up to us, no matter our age or stage in life.

A few weeks ago I received an email from Jenny and Neal Francis about the courageous life of Irena Sendler, who in difficult times, sought to use the gift of her life in the service and care of others. After watching the Utube video of Glenn Beck sharing the profound story of her life, I Googled “Irena Sendler” and this is what I learned about this very heroic and life-filled woman:

**Irena Sendler** was born in Poland in 1910 and raised by Catholic parents to respect and love people regardless of their ethnicity or social status. Her father was a physician who died from typhus that he contracted during an epidemic in 1917. He was the only doctor near Warsaw who would treat the poor, mostly Jewish victims of this tragic disease. As he was dying, he told 7-year-old Irena, “If you see someone drowning you must try to find a way to rescue them, even if you cannot swim.” In 1939 the Nazis swept through Poland and imprisoned the Jews in ghettos where they were first starved to death and then systematically murdered in killing camps. By then, Irena was a social worker in Warsaw who

remembered her father's last, profound words to her. She saw the Jewish people drowning and resolved to do what she could to rescue as many as possible, especially the children.

Working with a network of other social workers and brave Polish people, she smuggled 2,500 children out of the Warsaw ghetto and hid them safely until the end of the war. Sendler took great risks – obtaining forged papers for the children, disguising herself as an infection control nurse, and diverting German occupation funds for the support of children in hiding. She entered the Warsaw ghetto, sometimes two and three times a day, and talked Jewish parents into giving up their children. Irena drugged the babies with sedatives and smuggled them past Nazi guards in gunny sacks, boxes and coffins, training her dog to bark so that the Nazi guards who stopped her for questioning, would not hear the cries of the young children. She helped the older Jewish children escape through the sewers, through secret openings in the wall, through the courthouse, through churches, any clever way she and her network could evade the Nazis. Once outside the ghetto walls, Sendler gave the children false names and documents and placed them in convents, orphanages and with Polish families. Her hope was that after the war she could reunite the children with surviving relatives, or at least return their Jewish identities. To that end she

kept thin tissue paper lists of each child's Jewish name and their new Polish name and address and hid the precious lists in glass jars buried under an apple tree in the back yard of one of her co-conspirators.

In 1943 Irena Sendler was arrested, tortured and sentenced to death by firing squad. At the last moment she was saved when some of her co-workers bribed a guard to secure her freedom and then kept her safely in hiding until the end of World War II. For the rest of her life, she bore the scars of her torture and the disability of having both of her legs and feet broken. After the war, the Communist government suppressed any recognition of the resourceful and loving Polish people who risked their own lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

**Irena**'s story was for the most part buried and forgotten until 1999, when four Kansas teens uncovered **Irena**'s story. Liz Cambers, Megan Stewart, Sabrina Coons, and Jessica Shelton, students at rural Uniontown High School were looking for a National History Day project. With the help and inspiration of their teacher, Norm Conard, they began to reconstruct the remarkable achievements of this forgotten hero of the Holocaust. They created a play about her rescue efforts called *Life in a Jar*, which has since been performed

more than 200 times in the U.S., Canada and Poland. In May 2001 they visited **Irena** in Warsaw and began a friendship that has inspired other Polish Righteous Gentiles to break their silence. In her last years, Irena was cared for by one of the Jewish girls she smuggled past the Nazis. Irena was recently nominated for the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, losing to Al Gore. (When I told this story in Post last week, one man came up to me after the sermon and said, “If Al Gore was a real man, he would have given that woman the Nobel Peace Prize!) Irena Sendler died a few months ago on May 12, 2008, at the age of 98 and her obituary said this: Irena’s legacy of repairing the world lives on as good continues to triumph over evil.”

And Jesus said, “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” And then he asked, “What will it profit for them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” And so this morning, may we celebrate the truth that losing life for the sake of love is gaining life and that giving yourself away to those who need you, your love, your strength, and your compassion is to be truly and authentically alive. May we truly enable each other on

this day to hone our skills of giving life away and practice more fully the art of losing our lives.

Footnote: I want to always give proper credit to the sources I quote and so I want people to know that I think I read about the Russell Baker story and the James Autry story from one of John Buchanan's sermons but I have searched the archives of The Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and I can not find them. I am so grateful that this wonderful pastor and theologian makes his sermons available to all. The website of this great church is [fourthchurch.org](http://fourthchurch.org).

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Loving and Gracious God,

We gather today to see our friends, to worship You and to be quiet for a brief time while we remember what it is that we truly need in our lives. When we stop our working, our doing, and our just being so darn busy, we are often reminded that we are very tired and that the things we have worked so hard for and striven so long

after are very nice but do not meet the deep needs we have for loving and being loved, for feeling that our lives really do make a difference to others, and for being at peace with ourselves, our loved ones and our God. We spend so much of our time and energy and so much of our brief lives getting and earning and striving and climbing and counting at the end of the day what we have acquired and what we get is just more of the same.

Help us O God to give and to experience the wisdom that if we have the courage to lose our lives for the sake of love we really will receive life anew. Deep down we all know that if we want to really live we have to give our life away and yet for some reason we don't trust this truth enough to live it out fully and as a result we don't live very freely. We pray that some day our passion for having and getting may find a peace in our passion for giving.

We ask that your presence would be a guide to all of our loved ones who are sick, grieving, heartbroken, hurt, depressed, and struggling with life-changing issues. During times of tumult and distress, it is very difficult to see clearly or to know how to pray. Help us to pray for our loved ones in need and to find creative ways to be God's heart and hands to them so that we are all made more whole by life's difficulties and tragedies.

In the name of our Lord Jesus who showed us how to live and how to love, we pray, **OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN,**  
**Amen.**