

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
July 1-2, 2017

*Looking out for #1*

Readings: 2 Kings 4:8-16; Romans 6:3-4, 8-11; Matthew 10:37-42

“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” These strong words from Matthew’s Gospel encapsulate the problem of evil in a simple, and yet profound way. These words from the lips of Jesus get to the heart of the problem of right and wrong, of sin and grace, of death and life. And the heart is quite simply the problem of self.

It is a truth that appears paradoxical. He who loses his life finds it; he who decreases, increases in the eyes of the Lord. When we die to self, we are then and only then able to live for God. The belief is quite at odds with the typically American ideal of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. “Looking out for #1” is not only celebrated here, it is proclaimed as virtuous in many quarters.<sup>1</sup>

We should not be surprised, but I do hope that we are concerned and can see through to another way. A top ten bestselling motivational book begins by informing the reader that looking out for number one begins with the belief that “you have a moral right to take actions aimed at giving you the greatest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain, provided that your actions do not violate the rights of others.” The author also clearly argues that this attitude is neither narcissistic nor hedonistic. The Christian mindset would depart quite clearly from this premise.

Striving for success ought not to be automatically characterized as hedonistic. I have seen first hand how people of significant means have contributed to the good of others through their generosity in time, talent and treasure. Still, many studies show that the wealthiest often contribute the least in comparison to others.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Ringer, “Looking out for #1: How to Get from Where you Are Now to Where You Want to be in Life,” Skyhorse Publishing, 2013

In a 2011 study, the wealthiest Americans—those with earnings in the top 20 percent—contributed on average 1.3 percent of their income to charity. By comparison, Americans in the bottom 20 percent of earners donated 3.2 percent of their income.<sup>2</sup>

In his monumental work entitled, “City of God,” Augustine wrote of the battle between two cities, the earthly and the heavenly.

“Accordingly two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. For the one seeks glory from men; the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience.”<sup>3</sup>

This effectively becomes an operative definition of sin as “love of self even to the contempt of God.” Our contempt for the truth can manifest itself in the smallest of ways: pilfering office supplies from work, mailing personal letters from work using the postage meter. The world will still keep turning, but we have cheapened the meaning of truth when we take shortcuts.

We find our deepest meaning when we lose ourselves and get smaller, so that God can become greater. The wise men of earth gloried in their own wisdom, being possessed by pride. “But in the other city there is no human wisdom, but only godliness, which offers due worship to the true God, and looks for its reward in the society of the saints, that God may be all in all.

Our first reading may seem insignificant, but there is a good lesson here. We are never even told the name of the woman who was so charitable and hospitable, but only that Elisha was so moved by her generosity that he promised that in a year she would bear a child.

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<sup>2</sup> Ken Stern, “Why the Rich Don’t Give to Charity,” *The Atlantic* April 2013 Issue

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIV, 28)

This was no pay off, as she did not expect any payment for her kindness. Her charity was out of the goodness of her heart, seeking to consider the needs of others before her own. Her actions were not measured against the metric of what she could gain in return at a future date. She clearly anticipated the words of Jesus centuries later, “whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.”

Striving to exhibit a welcoming spirit, being consistently thoughtful of others and looking out for the needs of others- this forms the essence of a selfless life, and one that can bring tremendous joy and peace. Let us strive to live for the heavenly city by truly discovering whom God made us to be, believing first hand that it is better to give than to receive.