

receive the life you are looking for as a gift. Not grasping and getting and building a life for ourselves, but letting go, cutting the attachments, living life as a journey following Jesus who has nowhere to lay his head. The deepest spiritual wisdom in all the major religious traditions is that we find true life by letting go of our grasping of life, by opening ourselves up increasingly to the mystery of God and our relationship with God. The life of faith is paradoxical—dying in order to be born anew, letting go in order to receive, losing in order to find.

Whenever I think about these things, I remember a woman years ago who dropped by my office at the church in Greenfield, Indiana. Her story is like that of many I have known through the years. We had been talking for a few months about the life of faith and the restlessness she had been feeling, wanting to go deeper into this stuff about living by faith and following Jesus and what it all really meant in her life. She had begun to face some things in herself that she didn't like and wanted to change. She was also discovering things about herself that she had never embraced and affirmed. She had begun working with questions she had never asked before: What are my gifts? What is God calling me to do with my life? She had begun a daily practice of silence, prayer, reading, and reflection, which was helping her through this process. So one day she comes by my office, plops down on the sofa and says with a great sigh: "I didn't know being a Christian was so hard!" She did not say this with any sense of despair or discouragement or regret for being on this new path. There was an unmistakable joy beneath her "complaint." It had to do with faith moving from the head to the heart, from formalism to experience. It was the opening up of her life to her real relationship with the living God, God no longer as an idea or doctrine, but as the central Reality of her life.

I think this is what Jesus was talking about—the sword that cuts through all other attachments, the cross we are to pick carry as we follow him, letting go of our life for his sake so that we can discover and receive our true life. And I think it is what the psalmist meant by praying for an undivided heart, a heart and life centered and made whole because of first loving God. The sword that helps us cut away attachments also heals us and gives us an undivided heart, a life made whole.

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An Undivided Heart

Psalm 86:1-12, 16-17 *...give me an undivided heart to revere your name.*

Matthew 10:28-39 *Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

I received a phone call recently inviting us to participate in a large July 4 event. It was described as patriotic and "pro-family," complete with celebrity professional football players. I think the person who called expected me to be very excited about this. It is popular in many churches these days to yoke nationalism and what is called "family values." This is an easy sell because it simply mirrors the culture. It is what happens when religion loses touch with its core, its essence. In the case of Christianity, it is a distraction from Jesus' life and teachings, which give us nothing to justify an obsession with nation or family.

Jesus instructs his disciples before sending them out to preach the gospel of God's kingdom. He anticipates that this message will meet with resistance and rejection. They need not be afraid of this, says Jesus. Their only "fear" should be of God. Put another way, their greatest awareness needs to be of life in relation to God. "Fear," as it is used here and throughout the Bible, means awe and wonder at both God's sovereignty over and care of life. This kind of fear, or awe, means that we need not be afraid to live the life God has called us to live. The hairs on our heads are counted. If a sparrow cannot fall without the Creator of Life knowing it, surely everything we face will be known in the same way. As the Apostle Paul wrote, nothing in life or in death can ever separate us from God's love which we know in Jesus [Romans 8:38-39].

Then Jesus says that he has come to bring not peace but a sword. This sword is metaphorical, not literal. Christians have misused this passage to justify participation in and support of violence, of war. Jesus is talking about a sword that cuts the attachments that keep us from centering our lives in God alone. And that includes family. Jesus says he has come to set family members against one another, that whoever loves parent or child more than him is not worthy of him. These are shocking words. They cannot be put in the "family values" or pro-family column.

I think Jesus means that our relationship with God is foremost. It is the unifying center of our lives, in which we find our truest, fullest humanity. The uniqueness of our lives and the gifts we have to offer flourish in the soil of our relationship with God. I think that Jesus knows that family relationships can either nourish or hinder our belonging first to God. Most often, families do some of both. Sometimes families harm us so deeply that it takes a lifetime to awaken to our being persons valued and loved, with gifts to offer. Sometimes families wound us in subtle ways, out of loving motivations. They bind us in dependencies that keep us from the fullness and freedom of our personhood. Parents, motivated by love and believing they know what is best, sometimes hover over their children into their adulthood. Adult children still feelings deprived of parental acceptance and unconditional love may keep trying to get them from their parents long into their adult years, only to realize at some point that it is never going to happen in the way they want. Sometimes when we feel we did not receive what we needed from parents, we go through life placing on others our expectations and needs. This makes it difficult to love in truly free and mature ways. I think Jesus is saying whether our family was wonderful and nurturing, or miserable and damaging, let it go so that you can find your true self, the person you were made and meant to be.

Jesus uses the family, I think, only as the most familiar and closest form of attachment. There are other things to which we become attached, or addicted, that we cling to in ways that keep us from living fully and freely. Ideas. Structures. Relationships. Materialism. Substances. Success. And religion that has lost its heart, its essence. Jesus' remedy is simple and direct—cut the attachments. Stop seeking what you most need in places and relationships that cannot deliver. What you most need is to know and live out of your relationship with God. And that comes from your relationship with the Power that created the universe and your own small but precious life. You are a spiritual being and you need to return to your true home. Stop spinning your wheels in the ruts of regret or anger or guilt or unmet expectations. There comes a point at which we need to let go of the unresolved hurts, the irredeemable injustices of our life's experiences, and make that new beginning. We can stop watering in ourselves the seeds of unhappiness and begin nurturing the seeds of our own personhood in God. This is not really psychology or therapy; it is spirituality, which sometimes gives us a whack on the head—it wakes us up! Jesus was probably not a very good therapist, but he was a great spiritual teacher.

So, the first thing is to let go of the things that bind us from our true belonging and our true being. That is the work of the spiritual life. It is the way of letting go of what is NOT true life and true faith, while taking on what is life-giving and faith-giving. For Jesus it is taking up the cross and following him. What is the cross? The instrument of death upon which Jesus was crucified, of course. But it stands for more than that. Not just an instrument of death or a way of dying, but a way of living. That's what Jesus is really interested in, our living the life of persons working with our relationship with God and living out of that relationship for the sake of the world. Jesus is not interested in our worshiping him or even making him the center of our devotion. Most often, that is an avoidance, a distraction. He has already said that those who call him "Lord, Lord" are missing the point. It is not what we say with our lips or what we believe in our heads. It is how we live this one precious life we have been given.

Pick up the cross and follow me. That's the way to discover and be part of what I'm about, says Jesus. The cross stands for how we live our lives as persons growing in awareness of our relationship with God and God's reign over life, God's kingdom. It is not sleepwalking through life, unquestioning and numb to reality around us or in us. It is discovering what it means to be a true human being, what it means to live life as something sacred, something deep and meaningful, and figuring out how our own lives fit into all of that. Living this way will bring us into conflict with the culture around us, and sometimes with the church itself. It will mean struggling with ourselves as we do our inward journey work, each day touching our relationship with God and what it means for our lives. The way of carrying our cross is the way of new life for ourselves and the world. The cross is where the kingdom, or reign, of God intersects with our daily life in the world. It means living with constant awareness of the sacred canopy of life, of the world and our own lives as drawing life from God. It is the way of discovering and rediscovering what it means to live our lives in harmony with the deepest meaning and purposes of life as created by God. Sometimes living this way makes our lives harder—that's the suffering part of the cross. Yet even in the suffering and struggle, we will experience the joy of being in touch with what life is really about—that's the triumph and joy of the way of the cross.

If you keep trying to hold onto your life, grasping it to yourself, afraid of letting go, fearful of losing your status or self-image, then you lose exactly what you are most looking for. If you let go, work with dropping your attachments to ideas, people, projects, and the like, you open yourself up to