

A crowded airliner is about to take off. Suddenly the peace is shattered by a 5-year-old boy who picks that moment to throw a wild temper tantrum. No matter what his frustrated, embarrassed mother does to try to calm him down, the boy continues to scream furiously and kick the seats around him. Suddenly, from the rear of the plane, an elderly man in the uniform of an Air Force General is seen slowly walking forward up the aisle. Stopping the flustered mother with an upraised hand, the white-haired, courtly, soft-spoken general leans down, motions to his chest, and then whispers something into the boy's ear.

Instantly, the boy calms down, gently takes his mother's hand, and quietly fastens his seat belt. All the other passengers burst into applause. As the general slowly makes his way back to his seat, one of the flight attendants touches his sleeve, "Excuse me, General," she asks quietly, "But could I ask you what magic words you used on that little boy?" The old man smiles serenely and gently confides, "I showed him my pilot's wings, service stars, and battle ribbons, and explained that they entitle me to throw one passenger out the plane door on any flight I choose." (HOMILETICS, July-Aug 2011, p. 55-57)

I want to jump right in to the heart of this text – Jesus says "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny self, take up the cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save life will lose it, but whoever loses life for my sake will find it." (Mt 16:24-25) The Greek word *psyche* means not only 'life' but also the conscious self, the personality, the soul. We do not have to die physically in order to discover the truth of this teaching. We only need to lose track of who we are, or who we thought we were supposed to be, so that we end up lying flat on the dirt floor basement of our heart. Do this, Jesus says, and you will live.

As hard as preachers may work to clarify this koan, I do not believe that it can be done. This passage is about the search for real life, deep life, and that means we have to pass through the three stages outlined in these few lines. Jesus called the three stages finding life, losing life, and finding life again. This is the paradoxical promise that finders will be the losers, while those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake will wind up finding them again. This doesn't seem to make any sense – until we actually have to live it out. And none of us CHOOSES to live it out. It comes to us. Often with a vengeance and force that knocks us off of our feet. The promise contains truth that can only be experienced, and even when it is, I do not know anyone who readily volunteers for loss again. Yet loss is the great teacher of life – despite the fact that we all kick and scream against it. Loss is how we come to surrender our lives – if not to God, then at least to something beyond our selfish little selves. Paying attention to our own actions and reactions to this pandemic is a great illustration about all of this. We have lost the life we had – now what do we do about it? Something has died. So do we scream and whine and complain and blame? Or see what new depth might be asked of us, what new life is being born – both within us personally – as well as in our society? Is there life after COVID? The gospel – and Jesus – say yes. But it won't be exactly like life BEFORE COVID. Life lost, life found.

As I have repeatedly said, we learn very little from our successes. It is our challenges, sufferings, losses, pains, that instruct us and give us depth. Only when life forces us to commit ourselves to the task of becoming fully human do we find our life. This is not the same as the job of being human, which comes to us with our birth certificate. But to become fully human requires a conscious choice that not everyone is willing to make. The shallowness of our consumer-advertising culture is ample proof of the truth of this. How we could ever be convinced that a new this or that, a new and improved version of something will make us happy, admired, cool, is absolutely astounding. And yet we all fall for it over and over again. I WANT a new car. My friends keep telling me to BUY a new car. I don't NEED a new car because the one I have still runs! Let me ask

you a question: If I buy a brand new Candy Apple Red Convertible Mustang with four on the floor, MAG wheels, spoiler and leather interior -- will I look cool? (You can tell I haven't given this a single thought!) NO! I'll just look like an old fool who has just spent thousands of dollars on a new car!

If we understand the truth of what Jesus is saying about truly finding our life when we have lost it, then we will pay God the highest honor we can pay Him -- try to become fully, deeply, richly human -- because He sent His Son to show us how this is done. Jesus gave His life away on the cross -- and we all were enriched in the process. (freely adapted and lots of help from Barbara Brown Taylor, LEAVING CHURCH, pages not cited)

And second (of only 2 points!), an application of this truth. We live in a time not only of pandemic, but also of pain, and division. Daily, in the world and in the church, hatred, anger and bitterness are growing. It is ever harder to live at peace with each other, to be calm, not to alienate someone just by existing! There is so much wound and division around. Women's issues, poverty and social justice, the Black Lives Matter Movement and its reaction, questions of leadership and authority, issues of war and peace, treatment of migrants and immigrants, statues and what they represent, and styles of living and ministry are touching deep wounds and setting people bitterly against one another.

This doesn't even get to issues such as personality conflicts, jealousy, greed and sin -- which habitually divide. Our psychic temper is on the rise and with it, as Jesus predicted, son is turning against father, daughter against mother, sister against brother. We are being divided. Division is the work of DIABOLOS, the divider, Satan.

It is no longer possible to escape taking a stand on these issues, and to take a stand on them is to make enemies, to have someone hate you, to be accused of being narrow and to be alienated from other sincere persons. For anyone who is at all sensitive, this is the deepest pain of all. We have lost something of life, the life that we THOUGHT we had found.

We also have to admit that none of us ever approaches these issues in complete fairness and objectivity. We are all wounded, whether we admit it or not. Knowingly and unknowingly, in all these issues we have been either oppressor or oppressed and consequently we approach them either too full of wound or too defensive to see straight. In either case the temptation is to become bitter and to give in to the propensity to feel that we have the right to be angry, to hate certain people, to be self-righteous, and to withhold sympathy and understanding from certain others. This is the stumbling block that Peter was to Jesus. "GOD FORBID! THIS SHOULD NEVER HAPPEN!"

This is a tragic mistake. Valid, painful and imperative as these issues may be, reason, love, understanding and long-suffering can never give way to a progressive and militant bitterness which can irrevocably alienate. This is the road to hell because bitterness is hell. And it is to deny the reality that we have to die to self and to some of our self-understandings in order to negotiate these things and get to finding life once again.

Unfortunately, I believe we have forgotten this core teaching of Jesus. If we do not accept that we have to die in order to produce new life, we too easily give in to the temptation to think that because we have been wounded, or because others are wounded, we have the right to hate, to withdraw our empathy, to think in terms of black and white, and to be bitter. Bitterness is like cancer -- it slowly infects more and more of Christ's Body, and it is even more deadly than COVID.

The reality is that as Catholics we travel with almost a BILLION other Catholics all over the world. We cannot be on pilgrimage together -- which is what we signed up for in baptism -- without compromise,

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frustration, impatience, tears, rules and traditions which at times might seemingly strangle some of the life that the Holy Spirit is spawning. But when a universal church moves forward, it can only be in baby steps. Is this any different than the way we do it as individuals? Rarely do we take a giant leap forward in our human and spiritual development. As one of my spiritual directors used to say “We mostly grow in millimeters, not miles. So learn to be patient with yourself – and with others. We are all pretty much snails in the spiritual life.” PYGMY snails! Besides that – we are all in this together – like it or not!

We also could all lighten up a bit. None of this will be solved by a single individual alone. Because we are a community of disciples, we will solve things as a community of disciples. But we need to hold on to the hope of the final stage – FINDING LIFE again.

But that will require the hard work of being about reconciliation – in our own hearts, our own families, our own church, and our world. The answer lies in a fidelity which accepts suffering – the dying again and again and again. To be faithful – to become mature -- means to live in pain, in tension, in frustration, in seeming compromise, often hated by both sides.

Our call today is to reconcile -- by feeling the pain of all sides and by letting our pain and helplessness be a buffer that heals, the blood that helps wash the wound clean. As a simple start we can test how open-minded we are on all these issues by seeing how much pain we feel about them. If we do not feel pain, we are not open-minded. We think we alone have the correct answer, which is the greatest delusion of them all.

It is a time of pain for the church – but was there ever a time when the church was NOT in pain?! – a time when above all we must keep our inner calm of spirit and our outer charity toward all. It is a time to resist bitterness and that hardness of spirit which dampens the Holy Spirit. It is to be willing to die to self in order that we may at last find life once again. Amen. (last section adapted from FORGOTTEN AMONG THE LILIES, Ronald Rolheiser, p. 227-229)