

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 8/28/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Matthew 16:21-17

I recently received a phone call from a former parishioner who's on the board of directors of an organization called Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison. The mission of this wonderful group is to enable inmates at Sing Sing to take college-level courses. Through a liaison with Mercy College, Hudson Link offers incarcerated men the ability to earn a bachelor's degree while they're in prison.

Larry and I have been financial supporters of Hudson Link for a couple of years. I once sat in on a college class at the prison and talked with some of the men about how they felt about this educational opportunity. It was clear that it's been absolutely life-changing for them. The process of learning in and of itself, within a challenging, yet supportive program, along with the tangible end-product of a college degree, gives these men dignity, hope, and the real possibility for successful re-entry when they're released. Each year's graduation ceremony is about as redemptive an experience as anyone witnessing it has ever known.

So when the call came from this former parishioner, asking me to consider becoming a board member of Hudson Link, it was almost a no-brainer. I was flattered that they'd want me. I'm fully behind what they do. I have something to offer, since I have the privilege of being able to see things from the "inside" at Sing Sing, given my weekly presence there teaching a Bible class. But, like all of us, I'm already overcommitted and often feeling pretty frazzled, so I told Bruce that I'd like to think and pray about it for a couple of days.

I was about to call him to accept, when I received an email from the executive director. She wrote, "We're gearing up for a number of activities this autumn – at least one prison tour, and cocktail parties and fundraisers in Westchester County and New York. I'd like to brainstorm with you about these events." This poor woman had no idea, of course, what phrases like "gearing up for a number of activities this autumn" and "cocktail parties" do to me. I yelled "NO!" at the computer and propelled myself backwards, as though the screen was toxic. I decided that if this is what serving on the board of Hudson Link means, then it is definitely not something I'm called to do, because it would kill me.

In today's gospel text, Jesus describes the suffering and death that he, as God's anointed One, is about to experience. Jesus goes on to make it crystal clear to those who choose to follow him what it means for them to be his disciples. He says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

In the context of 1st century Palestine, Jesus' words weren't just for dramatic effect. He really meant it when he said that he would suffer and die, and if the disciples didn't believe it when he said it, they surely did when it actually happened. And when Jesus

told them that to be his followers, they must be willing to lose their lives, he meant it. Peter, several of the other disciples, and many early Christians did, literally, take up their crosses, losing their lives because they followed the way of Jesus.

There are still places in the world where being identified as a Christian will likely result in suffering and death. But because that's not the case for those of us gathered here, and because the world in which we live is so very different from that in which this gospel text was written, it's easy for us to dismiss Jesus' words about the cost of following him as irrelevant for us. Week after week, we gather together to proclaim Jesus as our Lord and our intention to live as he lived. But people in Westchester don't lose their lives because they follow Jesus.

Or do they? A successful executive finds that his company is involved in very questionable - though not strictly illegal - business practices, and that through his ongoing connection with that company he's implicated, directly or not. He may choose to challenge what's happening or leave the company. In either case, for the sake of following Jesus as he understands it, he could very well "lose" the life he's been living - including his salary, perks, and reputation in the industry. If his spouse isn't completely on-board with this major decision, that relationship might be in jeopardy as well.

Or, a woman, after a long, fairly gradual process of a deepening faith, has a dramatic spiritual experience that leads her to re-evaluate everything in her life. She yearns to integrate her faith more fully with her job, so she decides to leave her well-paying position as a corporate attorney to pursue something in a non-profit agency that deals with the homeless, which means a drastic change in life-style for the family. And, because her partner hasn't had a comparable, dramatic experience of God, the woman begins to question their compatibility at the deepest level, and a painful distance is created between them. For the sake of following Jesus as she understands it, she could "lose" the life that she's had.

My point is that, in our context, there's no formula for losing one's life for the sake of Christ; there's no best way to live sacrificially. Jesus knew the heart of God; knew what God's intention for the world was and is; knew how to bring that intention about; and lived it himself. So by listening to Jesus, we understand that the ultimate goal in this life, and the means to that end, is love. By watching Jesus, we learn that love is expressed by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing and visiting the sick, ministering to those in prison, serving all who are in need. By paying close attention to Jesus, we recognize that he consistently chose the way of humility and self-sacrifice over the path of personal success and power. He chose forgiveness over revenge and generosity over security.

And - he was human, and he got tired. He had a mother and siblings, and he was part of a community, with the responsibilities that go along with both. He worked as a carpenter. He was immersed in his faith tradition, which involved study, and corporate and individual worship. He engaged the crowds as he taught and healed, and he withdrew from the crowds for reflection, solitude, and rest.

As Christians, each of us will constantly struggle with what it means to lose our life for the sake of Christ – to let go of the things that distract us from joining Christ in his mission of love, that drain us of the time and the energy required to live out that calling day by day. Each one of us will continually struggle with what it means to find or to save our life for the sake of Christ – to recognize, develop, and use our gifts to make a difference in the world, to live authentically and intentionally, to both give of ourselves sacrificially, and to take good enough care of ourselves that we don't crash and burn. And, each of us has to do that in the context of earning a living, taking care of our family, and building and maintaining the relationships of the communities that support us.

Here's what I'm thinking about the board of Hudson Link in light of today's Gospel. I believe that working with Hudson Link is one important way that I can obey Jesus' command to care for those in prison. And, I know that I'll lose my sanity if I commit to sharing responsibility for fund-raising events, especially cocktail parties, for another organization, however worthy. Fund-raising events, including cocktail parties, are good things. Many gifted people love to plan them, do it well, and enable God's work to be done because of the money raised. I'm just not one of those people. And taking on something that completely drains me, even for a good cause, isn't the same thing as losing my life for the sake of Christ. But this process has made me realize that there is more that I can do with and for Hudson Link than I've been doing – things that I'd really love to do, the anticipation of which fills me with excitement, not dread. Maybe those things will justify a board position, or maybe not. But the precious time that I give for service that fits who I am doesn't feel like a sacrifice.

At its core, Jesus' message was this: Love your neighbor as yourself. Love is expressed through the feeding, clothing, healing visiting, and serving of our neighbors. We have to do it. And we have to do it in a way that doesn't deplete us, so that we can keep doing it. God created us for selfless love.

To what aspect of Christ's work in the world is each of us being called? Frederick Buechner has written that the place that God calls you to is the place where your deepest gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. In that sacred place, I believe that we will both lose our life for Christ's sake, and find it. Amen.