

Jesus said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

When I was just starting my doctoral studies at Vanderbilt, just before classes began, there was a party for all the students of the Graduate Department of Religion to get acquainted with each other. Now, you might not guess it from the way I behave on Sunday mornings, but I can be kind of shy at parties, especially parties where I don't know a whole lot of the people there. I wasn't sure I wanted to go to this Graduate Department of Religion party. But I figured this was a chance to meet a few people, make a few connections, start feeling more at home in this new setting I'd landed in. So I went. And I decided I wasn't going to be shy: I was going to walk up to somebody and introduce myself and say, “Hi, I'm Paul, I'm a new doctoral student here, I'm pleased to meet you.” I even practiced how to say my introduction. So I'm there at the party, and I see a couple of faces of people I've seen before in the bookstore, around campus, and I go up to a couple of people who are standing there at the snacks table, and I say, “Hi, I'm Paul, I'm a new...” And one of them says, “Oh, hi,” and then turns back to the other person and says, “So, as I was saying, it seems like everything I write these days comes out sounding like Wittgenstein...” and the two of them go on with their conversation, as if I weren't even there. And I thought, “Well, if that's the way it's going to be, then I won't make that mistake again! I won't risk being embarrassed like that a second time. I'll save myself the possibility of being humiliated again. I'll just stand here and wait for someone who wants to come up and talk to me.” And of course you know what happened: I stood there for a while, and then for a little while longer, and then a little while longer; and no one came up and talked to me, and I didn't go talk to anyone else, and after awhile the whole thing seemed pointless and I left the party and went home.

Jesus said, “If you want to save yourself, you'll lose yourself; but if you lose yourself for my sake and the gospel, your self will be saved.”

My little story of being miffed at a party may seem may seem trivial compared to the important spiritual and religious and life issues that Jesus talks about in the gospel. But I think they are related. At that party, I got so concerned with saving myself, I got so concerned with protecting myself from embarrassment, I got so concerned with securing myself from what seemed threatening, that I ended up losing any chance I might have had at having a good time, I ended up losing a chance to make some friends (or at least some acquaintances) in that new place, I ended up losing a bit of my self and the more engaged person I could have become. I tried to save myself and ended up losing myself, in a little way, at that party that night.

It's that kind of saving ourselves—trying to protect ourselves, trying to secure ourselves against possibility of accident or harm or humiliation—it's that kind of saving ourselves that Jesus warns us against in the gospel. Instead, Jesus shows us another way: “if you can be willing to lose yourself for my sake, and for the gospel,” Jesus says, “your self, your true self, will be saved.”

That's what Jesus taught, and that's how Jesus lived. Jesus did not try to protect himself from accident or harm or humiliation, Jesus did not try to secure himself from the risk of meeting other people where they were or encountering other people in their need. When a Gentile woman came to Jesus asking his help to cure her daughter, Jesus did not shy away from the religious disapproval of engaging with someone who was of the “wrong” faith. When Pharisees came to hear Jesus' teaching, even though Jesus knew full well that they were not coming as honest and genuine disciples, but that they came in order to find something in Jesus' teaching they could attack and condemn—even then Jesus did not

protect himself from them, Jesus did not try to secure himself against their threats, but he taught them, the same as he'd teach anyone else. When Jesus gathered around himself a community of disciples in which barriers were broken down, a community in which old power-relations were changed and transformed into relationships of compassion and mutuality, a community in which people were sisters and brothers with equal access to God in the Spirit—when Jesus formed that kind of community, he knew that the powers-that-be would be threatened by it, he knew the Temple authorities and the Roman politicians would try to stop him, he told his disciples so in our gospel lesson today. He knew living in the love of God's reign would put him in danger—but he did not try to protect himself from that danger, he did not try to secure himself from those threats, he did not try to save himself from the rejection and humiliation and harm he could see coming toward him. He did not try to save himself, and he died on the cross—and on the third day he was raised again, and his self, his true self, his identity in the living love of God, became the saving grace for us all.

“If you try to save yourself, you will lose yourself,” Jesus says, “but if you lose yourself for my sake, if you give yourself over to the great risk of living in God's love, then your self, your true self, will be saved.”

Someone shared with me once a story of a young couple whose first baby died of SIDS, in her crib, on an ordinary night, when there was no indication, no warning, no hint of any kind of trouble at all. The young parents were devastated by their baby's death, and their grief was deep and honest and very nearly inconsolable. At one point the young mother said to her Bible study group, “I'm not sure I could ever have another baby again. I'm not sure I could risk loving someone so much when I knew they might die. I'm not sure I could risk losing so much again.” And for a long time she tried to protect herself against that risk. But eventually the couple worked through their grief, and they thought they were ready to try being parents again. They had two more children, who grew up to be strong and healthy and wonderful, who put their parents through all the trials and tribulations, all the triumphs and wonders, all the late nights worrying and bright days celebrating that children put their parents through. And when the youngest child was about to graduate from high school, the not-so-young-anymore mother said, “There was a time I didn't think I'd be able to do this. There was a time I wanted to save myself from the risk of loving children again. But if I had done that, if I had saved myself, I would have lost all these years, I would have lost these two beautiful young people who've grown up with me, I would have missed out on being a parent along with my husband who loves so much, I would have lost the chance to become the mother it means so much to me to be. If I had saved myself, I would have lost all that—and thanks be to God for not letting me save myself that way!”

Jesus said, “If you try to save yourself, you lose yourself; but if you lose yourself for my sake and the gospel, your true self will be saved.”

And that is the gospel invitation to us today as well. To us in our personal lives, in our relationships with each other, not to try to protect ourselves from the possibility of hurt, not to be afraid to risk losing ourselves by loving each other, but to be open to receive the gifts and the needs we bring to one another. It's the gospel invitation to us in our parish life, not to try to save ourselves by doing things a certain way because “we've always done it that way,” but to take the risk of opening up to new people, new ministry opportunities, new mission collaborations, new ways of taking our wonderful heritage and history as Trinity Church and applying that to living the Gospel into the needs and the opportunities of the twenty-first century—so that we can find our true self, our true identity as a renewing community in Christ. Over and over again, Jesus says to us today, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Let us pray today that we may so lose ourselves in Christ, that we find our true selves in the power of Christ's love. Amen.