

## Losing and Finding: Matthew 16:21-28

Norwalk Christian Church, August 31, 2014, Year A, Proper 17

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I have a confession: I love end-of-world movies. Give me a bin of popcorn and a movie about an world-wide alien invasion, or an out of control zombie virus epidemic, an asteroid on a crash course for earth, a mayan prophecy predicting the end of the world in the year 2012, and I'm happy. Marti doesn't understand this guilty pleasure. She leaves the room. But I know I'm not the only one. These movies are crazy popular, these days. Someone else is watching them besides me. It seems like every week a new one hits theater, or a new apocalyptic TV show is piloted.

Now, I'm not naive. I know the acting is usually overdone, and the premise far fetched. And yes, for as many end-of-the-world stories as there are--and I love them all--they are all pretty much the same. Some unknown thing (aliens, zombie virus, cyborgs), the likes of which we've never seen, causes global chaos and massive death. And humanity has a choice to make. Either they go on the defensive, holding on tight to what they have, doing whatever they must do in order to survive. Or, they go on the offensive, attacking the force that threatens them in a David and Goliath fight for the future of civilization.

Now, did you know that the gospels are end of the world stories? I know, you thought Revelation was the only one in the Bible. It may be hard to recognize it at first, with the lack of zombies and aliens and asteroids on a collision course for earth. But the Gospels record a critical time in the life of Jews. It is the end of the world as they know it. Their land had been invaded by the foreign empire, Rome. Their very way of life is threatened. If they don't do something quick, judaism will die.

What should they do? The religious leaders, they go on defense. They're the ones that build the bunkers. Find the complex with the highest fences, to keep out any outside influence. It's a crisis, and if you're going to survive, you've got to hold onto what you got. Now is the time to double down on the law. Preserve our identity. No outsiders! No risks! Play it safe, and maybe we will survive.

Someone like Jesus threatens their mission. He keeps opening the doors, letting people in who shouldn't be there, compromising who they are. He's too risky. Something must be done for the sake of survival.

The disciples, on the other hand, and in particular Peter, have a completely different way of looking at things.

Last week, we heard Jesus praise Peter. Jesus asked his Disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter answered, "You are the Messiah! The Son of the Living God!" Jesus praises Peter for answering correctly, and even gives him the name "Peter", which means Rock. Peter is a solid foundation, a rock, on which Christ could build a church.

He's the kind of guy you want on your side when the end of the world comes. But then, moments later, the rock Peter is called a stumbling block, and satan, the very name given to personify evil. Why the drastic change?

For Peter and the Disciples, Jesus is the Messiah, the hero who will lead his people in victory over Rome. Their mission was to go on the offense! They're the motley crew of renegades, in the end-of-the-world movies, plotting far-fetched schemes to defeat their foes, and save humanity. In their minds, if Jesus could feed over 5,000 with 5 miracle loaves of bread and basket of fish, what could he do with an army of that size?

And as soon as they are ready to organize the troops, Jesus starts talking about death. Matthew tells us, "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

This was not the way it's supposed to be! Denying yourself--that will get you killed! Peter rebukes Jesus. Jesus rebukes Peter. Get behind me, satan! Then Jesus delivers what is known as one of his hardest sayings. "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."

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Self denial. There's a lot that churches have ignored about Jesus' teaching. But this denying yourself stuff...this churches can do! We may not think twice about upgrading to a new, over-sized HDTV at home...but get church folk in a board meeting discussing the budget, and we will pinch every penny. Didn't we just buy new children's curriculum in 1983? If those sofas were good enough for my great-grandmother when she died and left them to the church 50 years ago, they're good enough for me!

Of course, pinching pennies is just a means to an end. It's about survival. It's a hard time to be a church today. It's the end of the world as we know it. The place of church in society has changed. Respect for the church has dropped. Attendance has dropped. Giving has dropped. Denominations are in survival mode. Our way of life is threatened.

And what should we do? Well, like every end of the world story, we have two choices. On the one hand, we can hold onto what we have. Save as much as we can. No risks. No outsiders. Play it safe, go on the defense! Preserve our way of life!

This happens a lot in churches. Budgets are cut. Ministries are ended. Ministers are laid off. Don't do anything to rock the boat. People may leave, and we can't afford to offend someone. The goal is survival, and we will give up our mission for the sake of it.

On the other hand, we can go on the offense. There are Christians today who advocate strongly for this response. After all, this is war! A culture war, and if we hide away we

will lose the fight! Demand the church be respected! Demand religion be returned to the status it once had! Put prayer back in schools! Put Christ back in Christmas!

While the strategy is different with each of these responses, one thing is the same. Both are motivated by the fear of death.

We live in a culture terrified of dying. All we need to do is look at what we spend on skin care products, health insurance. We don't have funerals anymore. That's too dark. We have celebrations of life. They bring a doctor with Ebola to Atlanta for treatment, and the talking heads go crazy. There's going to be a breakout in America, we are told! We build a huge wall at our southern border, thinking that will make us safe. We go through crazy security protocols to get on an airplane, thinking that will protect us. The goal is survival. And offense or defense, we all are terrified of dying.

But Jesus has a word for us today. There is something much worse than dying: to never have lived in the first place.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

“The deep secret of Jesus’ hard words to us, is that our fear of suffering and death robs us of life, because fear of death always turns into fear of life, into a stingy, cautious way of living that is not living at all. The deep secret of Jesus’ hard words is that the way to have abundant life is not to save it but to spend it, to give it away, because life cannot be shut up and saved.”

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Peter rebuked Jesus. He didn't want Jesus to die. He didn't want his life, and all that it meant for God's people, to be wasted away! But Peter missed what Jesus said. Do we miss it, too?

Listen again: “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, *and on the third day be raised.*”

Jesus was never talking about how he's going to die. Jesus is talking about how he's going to live.

Too often, we never get to the part about life, because we get hung up on the suffering and death. In our attempt to avoid our own demise, we never enjoy life in the first place. Suffering and death, well that's part of being human. We can't avoid it. So stop being scared of it! We all suffer, and we will all die. But not all of us truly live.

Life requires risk. You can't walk out the door without facing risk. You can't have love, without the risk of heart break. You can't have friendship, without the risk of rejection.

And it may be the end of the world, yes. But Jesus is inviting us into God's new world. A world of new life, where death does not have the final say. A world where God would risk becoming human, putting on flesh, and along with it, all the pain and suffering of humanity, so that we, the people of God, may truly live.

Jesus invites us to follow him. And the path he's on doesn't avoid death. It goes right through it. Right through our fears and worries. Right to the cross, but through the end of our worlds, as we watch a new world spring up around us.

It's not an easy road. You may have to risk it all. Jesus did. But if it's life you're after, then hold on tight.

"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."

Losing your life in order to find it. It sounds crazy! And it is. But whoever said following Jesus would make sense. Amen.