

**11 Pentecost  
August 28, 2011**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

The definition of a “paradox” is a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true. A “chiasmus” is a figure of speech by which the order of the terms in the first of two parallel clauses is reversed in the second. An example of a chiasmus is: “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.” The name “chiasmus” comes from the Greek letter “chi” which is our letter “X” ... it forms a crossing.

In the reading from Matthew’s gospel this morning we hear:

*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

This is both a paradox and a chiasmus. A paradox because it would seem that one cannot save and lose, and/or lose and save, at the same time. And this is a chiasmus because of the switching of the words “save” and “lose” in the two parallel phrases of the sentence.

Human beings are born hardwired to desire abundant life: biologically, emotionally, and spiritually. This is what it means to be made in the image of God. However, the abundant life that we seek is a life full of everything: certainty ... and confusion; health ... and dis-ease; wealth ... and poverty; good ... and bad; love ... and hate; joy ... and sorrow. We naturally affirm the former and revile the latter rather than accept it all as part of the whole of life.

The desire to know abundant life takes many forms. There are those who take inordinate risks to prove they are alive. They live life in the fast lane and rarely look in the rearview mirror. It is as if they want to prove to the world, and to themselves, that they are alive ... at any cost.

Then there are those with such a fear that something may take away their life as they know it that they choose to live in a protective shell. They isolate themselves from all risks and insulate themselves from possible pain. They live lives in the safety of routine in their jobs, families, relationships, and spirituality. They write and sign documents like the Nashville Statement condemning others ... in their minds they are protecting their own righteousness.

Those who are the risk-takers sometimes over-indulge and become addicted to just the entity they thought was life-giving. On the other hand, those who live in fear of losing what life they have find addictions a way to numb oneself from the pain they experience. In either case in the process of living out their desire for an abundant life they, instead, find life draining away.

I believe that at the heart of this issue is the question of our sense of “self” and of where we find the center of our being. For many people life is defined by what others think of them: by the status they hold, by the possessions they own, by the intelligence they have, by the beliefs they profess, by their value in the relationship. In general, their “self” ... their “being” ... is defined by the image they project, or, at least, the image they think they project. When that happens the “life” that Jesus is talking about constantly needs “saving,” and instead of living the abundant life of a child of God we get caught up in the need to protect the image we have created.

I know, at least for myself, that this isn’t just about other people. I personally know about holding on much too long to an idea of what I would like life to be like rather than accept the reality that was in front of me. I know the times I have taken huge risks proving to me and others that I was alive. And I also know that I have defended the status quo in my life for fear that any change might cause an end to a way of being. And I also know that some of you are on the edge of living life, for you have told me about attempts to “save” your life, and in the process feel like you are losing it.

*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

If we know the experience of wanting to save our lives and in the process feel like we are losing it, then what might it be like to lose our life to find it? What does losing one’s life mean? Well, Jesus gives us an example ... himself. He came up out of the waters of his baptism and heard the voice of God, “You are my beloved.” In that moment he was affirmed as a beloved child of God made in God’s image. His life became a commitment to living the will of God. He “chose life” as the life that God gave him ... always open to every opportunity to encounter the divine in all who he met.

What does it mean to “lose your life?” It means living each day as an opportunity to experience God and God’s creation in a new way. It means letting go and trusting. It means abandoning worn out attitudes that have only served as a crutch as you limp through life. It means giving up your addictions ... even the ones that seem harmless. “Losing life for my sake” means approaching your life with curiosity so that you can discover the “self” within you that is made in God’s image. It means living life the way that Jesus chose to live his life.

This is often a tricky path, because one needs confidence and trust before taking the risk of letting go. Just ask a person addicted to alcohol or drugs who is facing the choice of recovery. Or the woman in an abusive domestic relationship who is considering leaving the only shelter she and her children have. Which comes first: the letting go, or the confidence? I think it is like a Gordian knot ... it is all tied up on itself. But once you let go then the affirmation of being a beloved child of God sits on the other side. Don't get me wrong. This is tough work. It is risky work. But the example we have is the one who lived fully as he went to the cross. The cost may be high ... but so is the reward.

My sister Jane came out of the closet as a lesbian woman when she was in college. My father was horrified. He was upset and angry. It was as if Jane's sexual orientation was a reflection on his manhood ... and on the way others would think of him. He didn't exactly shun Jane, but he certainly didn't embrace her either. Then one morning he woke up ... literally ... and said to himself, my mother, and everyone else, "I love my daughter Jane. I have been wrong. My anger at her ... and myself ... is stealing life from me and I owe it to her ... and to everyone else ... to be more than that." It wasn't until my father could "lose his life" that he could gain it.

Sadly, those who have affirmed the Nashville Statement ... at least in my view ... are trying to save their lives so hard that they are losing the real meaning of life. Each affirmation they make is anything but affirming, and every denial they make is a judgement. God made all of us in God's image ... all of us. God doesn't want us to be in the business of judging ... Jesus taught us that. God is so much greater than anything that we can imagine that it defies understanding ... we have no right to try to put limits on God's love. When we try to save our life we end up spending all our time filtering what we see as the good and the bad ... rather than trusting. When we are willing to lose our life ... let go of our judgements ... we open ourselves to God's goodness in a way that cannot be known any other way.

I was faced this morning with two wonderful readings from scripture on which to preach ... the story of Moses and the burning bush ... and this paradox. However, when we look at the story of Moses ... a man in self-proclaimed exile for fear of his life ... living a simple life of tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro ... and then encountering the divine presence of God in a burning bush ... we see the same dynamic at play. Moses had a choice ... the status quo and simple security ... or taking the risk of living into God's call to live in God's image. When Moses tries to escape the task by self-deprecation ... "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" ... God replies, "I will be with you."

Yes, I think it is like a Gordian knot ... it is all tied up on itself. But once you let go then the affirmation of being a beloved child of God sits on the other side. And don't get me wrong ... this really is tough work. And it is risky work. But the examples this morning ... Moses following God's call ... and Jesus, the one who lived fully as he went to the cross ... tell us that the cost may be high ... but so is the reward.

The life we find on the other side of those choices is the life that God intends for us. In it we find our true “self.” In it we experience the divine alive in us in ways beyond our imagination.

*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

Maybe this is a key to understanding all that came before it and all that comes after it ... in our own lives and in the gospels. I certainly know people who have come to that “chi” moment in their life ... that fulcrum point. They have made a hard choice to give up ... to lose ... the life they have been living and finding a new one. They tell me that it is a paradox ... and it is a chiastic moment in which the view of their world before takes on a different understanding ... and the view of their life after that chiastic moment is seen in an entirely new way.

Amen.