

The Poured Out Life: Risk Something Big for Something Good

Mark 8:31-36

Risk something big for something good.

If you worship in this place regularly, you may have heard those words before. You've heard them many times before, actually; because that phrase is part of the benediction that I use at the end of every worship service. I cobbled that blessing together in 2002, when I went to pastor a church for the first time. I took the words from various prayers and blessings written by William Sloane Coffin, the American theologian and former pastor of Riverside Church in New York. But because he was such a prolific writer, and because I knew him a little before he died, I thought he might not mind if I borrowed those words and spoke them out loud regularly. But I always know that blessing doesn't belong to me. When other people ask if they can use it, it's easy for me to say 'yes'. And so now, in some tiny way, that blessing has gotten around. Brian McLaren used it to close his most recent book, which feels to me like a great honor. And I googled the words of my benediction the other day and saw it referred to as 'Liz's blessing'—Liz Jones who is apparently an Episcopal priest in Mississippi. Never met her in my life. I love it.

What I really want to talk about are just the words "Risk something big for something good." That phrase has become a cornerstone of our changemaker work. It's one of the first things changemaker fellows hear, and then hear over and over again, as they begin their commitment to become 'compassion-driven change makers like Jesus'. That's not just because it's an inspiring phrase. It's because 'risk something big for something good' captures, in more modern language, a challenge that's right at the heart of the Gospel, the stories of Jesus.

You heard in the Scripture reading the way Jesus said it. He was reflecting with his disciples about his own life. 'I'm going to suffer and die for the way I'm living, for saying what matters most to me. This is the path my life is going to take; I know it.'

His friend Peter jumped in to save him. 'No, no!' Peter said. 'Why are you thinking negative thoughts? It doesn't have to be that way.'

'Yes it does,' replied Jesus. 'This is how it works. If you want to live as the expression of God's life, if you pour yourself out with love the way God does, it's like picking up and carrying your own cross, the thing that might take you all the way to your death. If what you care about most is saving your own life, you're going to lose something important in the long run. You save your life by being willing to lose it.'

I've heard and read these words from the Gospel of Mark for many years, and I'm still not sure I know exactly what Jesus was trying to say. There are a lot of things about carrying your cross, and being willing to lose your life, that I don't understand. Over centuries of Christianity, Jesus' words have been translated into a call to martyrdom, and a justification for letting people suffer—lots of things that really don't sound to me like human flourishing. I don't believe that Jesus meant that we should spend our lives preparing ourselves for death.

But here's what I think I do understand: that we find life—flourishing life—when we give ourselves away for something that matters more to us than our own self-preservation, even our own good health and wellbeing. That being fully human the way God hopes for us means finding and loving something bigger than ourselves, something more important than our own happiness. Something worth pouring yourself into, even if the risk of that pouring is that you might be empty at the end.

It is not Jesus alone who knew this is true.

The sculptor Henry Moore—whose public art you have probably seen if you've been to London, or Washington DC, or San Francisco, any of a number of cities and museums around the world—he was passionate about putting art in places where everyone could see it and enjoy it, no matter who they were, whether they could afford to go to museums or not. He said once, *“The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is—it must be something you cannot possibly do.”*

The poet Mary Oliver, in her poem called *When Death Comes*,

*When it is over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

*When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.*

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Mary Oliver captures in that poem the fear I've heard more often than any other in all the years I have been a pastor. *Everyone* wonders: What is my purpose? *Is* there a purpose to all the ups and downs of my life? What if there is some purpose I was made for, and I've missed it, or haven't found it yet? All of us long, I think, to find the thing we can throw ourselves into, the love, or the cause, that we feel passionate about, that will inspire us to want to keep giving more, not less. That thing that so worthy of our devotion that we lose our fear about what might happen to us.

If you are a parent, maybe you have found this in your children: a love so complete that you are willing to pour yourself into another life until you are exhausted, beyond exhausted. But our children grow up; they don't need us to live their lives for them, or even with them, forever. Where does our love go then? To keep pouring ourselves into containers that are already full can look more like control than it does love. What is the container that can receive *all* that we have to pour out?

Some of us find our purpose, or we think we do, in our jobs, the work we are paid to do. I read something just the other day that observed that this is a particularly American phenomenon, this looking for transcendence and meaning in our work. And often it disappoints us. It turns out the company you work for cares more for profit than it does loyalty to its workers. The project

finishes. The company is sold. You retire. And you realize that the thing you gave yourself to was too small. Important maybe, but not ultimate. Good, but not good enough.

It is not too late. Even if your children are long since grown, even if you are already firmly planted in a career that it turns out will not change the world, even if you are retired. The world is full of people who need something you have to give, causes that will be moved by whatever it is you have to offer. By your willingness to give your heart.

I recently read a memoir by the wonderful writer Ann Patchett. *These Precious Days*, it was called. She tells the story of a surprising friendship that happened to her when she was not looking for it. She learned, casually, that a woman she barely knew was entering treatment for cancer at a hospital near Patchett's home in Nashville. Spontaneously, she invited this almost-stranger to come and live in her guest room for as long as the treatment took. Her houseguest stayed for over a year. "The first door opened and I walked through," Patchett wrote as she remembered how this happened. She and Sooki became fast friends, so close that when Sooki was dying at her own home in California, Ann Patchett flew there to be with her. It was a friendship that changed her life. She had no idea what she was doing when she opened her home to a stranger. Sometimes, she wrote, we just have to "lay down the burden of our own vigilance."

What—or who—would you pour yourself into if you were not afraid it would take too much from you?

This is what faith is for; this is why we follow Jesus. To learn what is true: that we find life in loving something more than our own lives. In the words of the Jesuit priest Pedro Arrupe:

*Nothing is more practical than finding God,
than falling in Love in a quite absolute, final way.
What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.
It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read, whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.
Fall in Love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.*

May it be so for us. May it be so for you.