

One day, a man was hiking along a path through the woods. Suddenly, not really paying attention where he was going, he slipped. Losing his balance, he found himself sliding off the edge of a cliff. But as he fell, he grabbed hold of a branch. Finding himself in such trouble, the man prayed for the first time since he was a child.

Desperately, the man cried, "Is anybody up there?"

And out of nowhere, a voice answered him, "Yes, I'm here!"

"Who are you?" the man asked.

"The Lord," the voice replied.

"Lord, help me!" pleaded the man.

"Do you trust me?" the voice asked.

"Yes, I trust you completely, Lord," the man said.

"Good. Then let go of the branch."

"What? Let go of the branch?"

"Yes, I said let go of the branch."

After a long pause, the man asked, "Is there anybody else up there?"

After hearing today's strange and scary words about what it means to be a disciple, maybe we're also asking ourselves if we've got the right God. I mean, He says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." And while having a God who'll be crucified for us—though still not popular—is one thing, following him to our own crucifixion, carrying our own cross on our backs, getting nailed ourselves is no way to recruit!

I have three kids at home and many more children's Bibles, and I don't recall ever coming across this difficult saying of Jesus in any of them. I have yet to have a confirmand choose this passage for their Confirmation verse. And I'm pretty sure I've never received a Christian greeting card with these words on the front. The other day driving by, I saw a church sign that said, "Come, celebrate recovery!" Y'know, come celebrate the joy of getting better! But, after today, maybe instead it should read, "Come, be crucified! We've got a cross with your name on it!"

It's enough to make us scratch our heads—if *we're God's children, if God loves us so much, we figure, then wouldn't He pamper us like nobody's business? Not only wouldn't we have to carry a cross, but we shouldn't even have to lift a finger, right? Everything should be dropped into our laps, served to us on a silver platter, don't you think?* I know it sounds silly when we hear it out loud, but isn't that how we feel?

Maybe you remember last Sunday, when we heard about the Baptism of Jesus in Mark's Gospel. There He was, still dripping wet from the River Jordan. God the Father's proud affirmation of His Son still ringing in His ears. And a bird of peace, alighting gently on Him. Then, all of a sudden, we're told, that peaceful dove seems to grow talons, grabbing hold of Jesus and flinging Him into the wilderness with the wild beasts. If you or I were Jesus, winding up there after having just had the heavens part for us and hearing "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased," we'd probably be thinking, *Boy, God, you sure have a funny way of showing it!* But, if that's the way God treats His only-begotten Son, what would make us think we deserve special treatment?

Back when Will Willimon was the chaplain of Duke Chapel, a fellow campus minister asked him to take part in the Baptism of a graduate student. This grad student was a young man from China, who had been attracted to the Christian faith during his studies. Well, after meeting this grad student once or twice before, Willimon was thrilled to be invited to

serve at this man's Baptism. And Willimon even thought it would be a great idea to bring his camera along and capture the occasion on film.

"You can send these pictures back to your family in China," Willimon told the student. "You can share this special day with your friends at home," he said as he got everyone in place for pictures afterward. But to his surprise, he found that the group looked a little shy and awkward as they posed for the camera.

Well, after the Baptism, the other campus minister said to him, "Oh, that was embarrassing, your camera and all."

"Embarrassing?" Willimon asked. "Why?"

"Well, because now that he's baptized, his life is ruined. His parents said they'd disown him. The Chinese government will now probably take back his scholarship. He can't show these pictures to anyone back home. Life as he knew it is over for him; he's been baptized into Jesus." Very quickly, that young man learned the high price tag of discipleship.

Having been made sons and daughters of God at our Baptism, we've also found ourselves thrown into all kinds of situations, haven't we? Being a Christian, following Jesus, surrendering to His will can be risky business at times. We might never literally get nails driven through our wrists—y'know, actually be martyred like Jesus—but you and I are no strangers when it comes to crosses. It affects who we are and what's important to us—our commitments, our attitudes, our worldview. It changes the way we live in the world, even our level of comfort. Everything seems to fall under the shadow of the cross. And slowly, moment-by-moment, piece-by-piece, we hand our lives over to Jesus.

But interestingly enough, as crazy as it sounds, as bizarre as it seems, as counterintuitive as it is, Jesus' words have a strangely deep logic to them. Even a non-Christian poet like A.E. Houseman has called them "the most important truth about life ever uttered." When Jesus says, "whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it," well there's just something to that. It might not come naturally to us—we usually think "Finders keepers, losers weepers"—but we can actually find Jesus' backwards reasoning playing out in our world.

Here's what I mean—are you happy? Are you genuinely, authentically, honestly happy? Upward mobility—keeping up the Joneses—money, fame, power, social media followers, whatever—has any of that really made you happy? My guess is, probably not. Yet, it is around such things that our lives revolve. In fact, it is in such things we actually think we'll find life. But the thing is, we don't, do we? The more we cling to these things we mistakenly call "life" the more we feel dead, drained, in despair.

But what if this was your last week on earth? What if you only had 168 hours left, and the clock was ticking? How would you spend that time? Would you still be busy living for yourself, seeking out pleasure? Or, would your days consist of family and friends—doing nice things for them, giving things away, showing them how much you love them? See, Jesus' words to us today really do make a strange sort of sense. If we have both arms full of what we foolishly call "life" then you and I will find that what we've got our hands around is really death. But when we let go of all that and die to self—surrender who we are and what we have—then we'll finally have an arm free to reach out to others and find our life in service to them. Finders weepers, losers keepers.

I find it fascinating how studies show that the only way for money to truly make us happy is when we give it away. Or have you ever found that it's in loving others that you truly feel loved yourself? Or have you discovered unexpected rewards that have come through sacrifice? It's God's upside down way of thinking—but it's only in losing our lives that we finally live. Finders weepers, losers keepers.

Jesus knew this firsthand. Before coming to earth, He was richer beyond our wildest dreams; had everything He could ever have or want. He is *God*, after all! Yet, even He who is life itself, the author of life, by whom all things were made, even *He* wouldn't be living much at all if He didn't give that life away. See, without you and me—left dead in our trespasses and sins—life for Jesus wouldn't seem worth living. So to truly live it up, Jesus opened His arms, spread them wide on a cross. He gave away all that He had—His final breath, His last drop of blood, any life left in Him. And in doing so, He has drawn all people to Himself. He has gotten you and me back in His life for good. Finders weepers, losers keepers.

Jimmy had known Mrs. Wilson his whole life—all eleven years of it. She lived just a few houses down from the house where he grew up. He didn't know much about her, but then again, there's no reason he would. All he needed to know was that she'd put a crisp \$20 bill in his hand every time he'd cut her grass.

One Saturday in the dead of summer, it was unseasonably hot. Mowing out in the scorching heat for a couple hours, Jimmy was sweating buckets. Mrs. Wilson felt sorry for him, but she knew just what to do. While Jimmy finished up the last leg of lawn mowing, she got busy making him some fresh-squeezed lemonade.

When he was all done, Mrs. Wilson poked her head out the door. "Jimmy, it's awful hot out there, why don't you come inside and cool off. I've got an of ice-cold glass of lemonade waiting for you." Hearing this offer, Jimmy realized just how dry his mouth was. He couldn't turn down an offer like that. So after putting the lawnmower away he opened the front door.

He'd never been in Mrs. Wilson's house before. She handed him his drink, and as he sipped Jimmy looked around her living room. Mrs. Wilson had lots of pictures out. But immediately, one caught his eye—it was a lovely young woman with sparkling eyes, a winsome smile, and rich shiny curls. And even though he was eleven, Jimmy couldn't help but notice her pleasing figure.

Mrs. Wilson saw how the picture had caught Jimmy's eye, and said, "Y'know who that is?" Jimmy started to shake his head, but then when he made eye contact, he began to make out traces of that young woman which had been hidden in the person standing before him. "Why, it's you!" Jimmy said. "Mrs. Wilson, you look so beautiful in that picture."

Jimmy was confused—while not young, Mrs. Wilson was far from his grandparents' age. How could she have changed so much? And from other photos, certificates, and awards lying around Jimmy also got the impression that Mrs. Wilson might've come from a wealthy family, had a good education, maybe even enjoyed an exciting career at one point. Now, she lived in a modest house on Jimmy's block, just doing normal regular things. What had become of her former life?

Then, he laid eyes on a set of three pictures—Mrs. Wilson's three children. They were all grown now, sure, but he could still remember not too long ago when they lived in that house. Mrs. Wilson saw how Jimmy was now looking at these three portraits. She put an arm on his shoulder, "You remember Julie, Stephanie, and Jeff, don't you? Those kids were my life. There's nothing I didn't give them. Before they came along, I had been a track star, y'know. And Tom and I—err, I mean Mr. Wilson and I—we used to live in a better part of town. Back then, it seemed like the world was our oyster."

Just then, Mrs. Wilson let out a sigh—"But I guess we all make sacrifices. Mr. Wilson and I, well, we always said the children came first." Then, she paused, and Jimmy watched as a smile spread across Mrs. Wilson's face. She got a faraway look in her eyes and he could tell she was reflecting on something. Finally, she said, "But I'd do it all over again though. Thinking back on the time I had with them, well, sometimes it felt like I'd just *died* and gone to *heaven*."