

Lent Midweek
GIVING UP OUR LIVES
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
March 24, 2021

Pastor Patti and I have been talking about “giving it up.” Giving up control, giving up expectations, giving up superiority, giving up enemies. Now, giving up all these things: is this how we get ourselves nearer to God, the giver of all life, the source of our existence? No. God is all over us, whether we want him to be or not. Jesus is the only salvation we have. Jesus is the only way we can be in a full, forgiven, eternal relationship with God who is all over us, all the time. Only Jesus gives us that peaceful relationship to God. Trust...faith...is our only possible response to that.

So, in a way, we haven't been talking directly about salvation these past weeks. We've been talking more about *sanctification*. Life in the Holy Spirit. Sanctification is a road that Jesus has opened up for us. A new path on which we can walk with Jesus as saved people. We don't save ourselves by walking this new path; we can walk this new path because we've been saved. It was a road that was not possible for us before Jesus became the center of our lives. It was not even a road we knew about or thought about.

I picture sin as a dead-end. The most you can do without Jesus is go around in circles, always ending in the same place. No roads lead out. In sin, all I can see is human, worldly solutions to my problems. What I can see and measure and touch in this world—my money, my status, my political affiliation, the good deeds that I do—these are the things I'm going to use to try to save myself, and other people. Without Jesus, I can even start thinking that by letting go of things, I can save myself. The point is, all of our best efforts to sanctify ourselves without Jesus in the center get twisted back into the dead-end of sin and death. I think we're seeing a lot of that in our world today. We've dropped Jesus, we've dropped salvation; now we're trying to sanctify ourselves without Christ. The result is sanctimoniousness.

The point is, in sin, all I think I have is myself. So, I'm going to spend my life trying to build myself up. I keep thinking that by holding on to my life and building myself up, I might just find a way out of this dead-end. But there is no road out of the dead-end of sin that this world can build for itself.

We see this in the clash between Peter and Jesus in today's reading. When Jesus tells the disciples that the Messiah (he himself) is going to die as part of God's plan to **save** the people, Peter will not accept it. Jesus rebukes him: "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. For you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." You see, Peter is looking for Jesus to conform to the rules of the broken world. In this dead-end world, you don't willingly let go of your life. You build up your life. You hold onto it. Peter expects Jesus to be the kind of Messiah who builds a road for everyone out of the dead-end, by using tools and resources produced by the dead-end. You see the problem with this: If I am a defective builder using defective tools produced by defective machinery in a defective factory, I will keep building defective products. Jesus is telling Peter, you cannot rely on the tools of men to do a job that only God can do. That's kind of like a drug-addict trying to get out of his misery by taking more drugs. It's like a politician who decade after decade creates more poverty in the world by enacting the same solutions to poverty. It's kind of like the abused spouse who keeps looking to her abuser to save her from the abuse that he's inflicting upon her. God gave us an inborn desire to be with him, to get out of this dead-end, but we end up, sooner or later, beating our heads against a wall that we cannot overcome. Why? Because we think that we—or someone else in this world—can build a road to that beautiful place we all want to be. In sin, as Jesus puts it, our minds are focused on the things of men, and not on the things of God.

But now that Jesus has entered into our lives through Baptism and scripture and living Word proclaimed by the Church, we no longer are living spiritually blind, in that dark, dead-end of sin and death. Now we can see (at least through a mirror dimly) the destination that God has

prepared for us in Christ, and by the power of the Spirit we can actually move forward towards that goal. There we were, defective people using defective means to save our lives, to get ourselves out of the cul-de-sac. And here's Jesus 100% God and also 100% human being—that is to say, the perfect human being—who gives up all his perfect power, all his ability to come up with an instantaneous fix to the whole situation. He doesn't snap his fingers to magically fix us or reprogram us. Instead, he comes into our cul-de-sac and gives it all away and embraces you and me in the middle of all our fears. He goes straight into this nothingness that we're desperately trying to get out of, while we hold onto our lives. And he replaces that whole dead-end situation with something new. Himself. I'm yours, he says...now follow me. A new road opens up when we have him.

He didn't want to build a new road out of old materials. With all our defects, with all our brokenness, with all our fear, in the darkness of this dead end—he wanted to join himself with us. No snap of the fingers, no reprogramming. It was always his plan to pour out his life for us right here in the darkness, so that we sinners can walk with him on his path willingly, out of gratitude, out of love, out of thankfulness. So we can know him fully for who he is: the One who Saves us.

So now we're on this new road with him...a road we did not even see before or know. It's not a road we build. It's a way he has shown us through his example. And the destination, the goal, is not something we get by building ourselves up and holding on to our lives. It's a promise which we receive through him. Jesus himself is our reward. Being in this living relationship as we walk with him is our prize. We're not finished—we're on our way.

That's the big difference between life on the road with Jesus and life in the old dead end of sin. In the dead end, we kept on trying to find completion through the things we did for ourselves. We kept trying to become FINAL in ourselves...a place, a state of being where we were the center of whatever cul-de-sac we were living in. But in Jesus, we know that's never what life

was meant to be—us becoming final. As saved human beings, we find our completion in a living relationship that never stops coming to us. We find our goal not in becoming final ourselves, but in God, who never stops feeding us and providing for us and giving us his grace.

What does all this mean for our theme this Lent? Everything! We've talked about giving up control, giving up expectations, giving up superiority, giving up our enemies. This has all been about giving up our need to be final in ourselves, and trusting in God to keep giving us life from day to day. It's all about letting God ascend his throne in the center of our lives. In the dead-end of sin, we were trying to stuff ourselves till we were full. On the road with Jesus, we know we're never going to be full for long. Better to be hungry on the road with Jesus than full of ourselves in the dead-end. It's better to be hungry, because in Christ, we know God is going to be feeding us every step of the way, even in death.

In heaven, you know, we're still going to be on the road, seeing new things, having new adventures, receiving new gifts. We're never going to find completion in ourselves...it's all going to flow from the hand of God from one beautiful moment to the next. We'll be completely dependent upon him, but we are his sons and daughters; he treats us like kings and queens. In the meantime, yes, right here in this valley of sorrow and death, you and I are already on that road, moving forward to that future with confidence, because our Savior is walking with us right now.

Now we turn to our Savior who died for us, and we realize that instead of holding onto our lives and having them forcefully stripped away, we can actually let go. We can give up our lives freely and reflect God's image out to other people. What a great day it's going to be, when we finally have nothing more to give up.