

Yesterday's Sermon - In 10 Sentences or Less

Onward and Upward (Week 3): A Journey of Loss & Gain:



- 1) We began by considering the central message of one of the Bible's most unique voices, Ecclesiastes: its wisdom declares that so much of human experience is "vanity" (in Hebrew, "hebel," meaning empty, fleeting, passing, unfulfilling, and impermanent).
- 2) Thus, whatever else we can expect in life's journey, we should anticipate a lot of loss along the way - it's simply unavoidable.
- 3) That single acknowledgment leads to the profound insight that we don't really resist change, we resist loss.
- 4) The greater our attachment to something (a friend, dream, job, plan of action, place, etc.), the greater our fear that we will lose it, so the tighter we cling.
- 5) Also, so much of this loss in life is outside of our control (as Eccl. 9.11-12 puts it, "Time and chance happen to all of us") that we instinctively clutch all the more tightly to the few things we think we can control.
- 6) We often confine words like grieving or mourning to those who suffer the passing of a loved one, but really all of us spend a good deal of our lifetimes trying to cope with loss that we didn't choose, and when we're not doing it well, it manifests in us as anger, withdrawal, emotional disengagement, nostalgia, and so on.
- 7) But this is not the end of the story about loss, biblically speaking: Matthew 10.38-39, Luke 17.33, Ephesians 4.22-23, Philippians 3.8, and other passages like them all show that loss is the prerequisite for spiritual gain sometimes.
- 8) As Thomas Merton puts it, "The self that begins the journey to God is not the self that arrives."
- 9) Similar to repentance, the willingness to let go of something when God asks is an act of faith, because so very often you cannot see with any clarity the gain or new life that will follow.
- 10) Spiritually speaking, deconstruction often precedes reconstruction, and subtraction is often the route to addition, therefore our willingness to tolerate and even embrace voluntary loss is crucial to spiritual formation.

More to Explore and Do This Week

1) Read St. Paul's spiritual autobiography, which according to his own words is a tale of losing a great deal of his own previous self identity, and finding something greater in Christ: [Phil 3.1-16 NRSV](#)

2) The idea that our spiritual journey will involve a lot of "addition by subtraction" is similar to the idea that God's intent is for us to lose our false self along the way to discovering and becoming our true selves. This false/true self movement is something explored a good deal in contemplative Christianity. For example, check out this short devotional written about Thomas Merton's notion of the false/true self transition: [The Illusion of Our False Self](#)

3) Here's a spiritual reflection exercise for you this week, one you could do in your journal, time of prayer, with a friend over coffee, or in your class/small group...

Look backward at your life and try to find all the times we had to lose something - anything - in order for God to give you something new, a gain perhaps you couldn't yet see when He first asked you to let go.

Here are two tips for how to do this:

- Think backward and find all those moments or seasons in life of great spiritual growth or change, and then try to find what, if any, losses might have preceded them.
- Reverse that first process: start with the big losses in your life, especially the ones in which you felt God asking you to let go of something, and then try to identify the gain that came afterward.