

Lose Some Life to Save Some

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I don't think Jesus had those 128 soldiers primarily in mind when he taught his disciples that "those who lose their lives ... will save their lives."

Those 128 refer to the number of U.S. soldiers who took their own lives in 2008—the fourth year in a row that this figure has increased (2004: 67; 2005: 85; 2006: 102; 2007: 115).

And I'm pretty sure Jesus didn't have primarily in mind those who *Time* magazine included in its report that "for the first time in history, a sizable and growing number of U.S. combat troops are taking daily doses of antidepressants to calm nerves strained by repeated and lengthy tours in Iraq and Afghanistan" as a way of trying to "save their lives..."

Nor did he have in mind, I'm confident, those immigrants in this country with only temporary visas who are now being recruited into the armed services to meet recruitment quotas and to secure language and professional skills on the promise that they can become U.S. citizens in as little as half a year. The program is starting small (only a thousand in the first year), but the expectation is that, if everything goes according to plan, one in six new recruits (about 14,000 annually) will be enticed into the military via this bait of expedited citizenship.

As Staff Sgt. Alejandro Campos, a recruiter for the U.S. Army, is quoted by *The New York Times* as saying: "We're going to give people the opportunity to be part of the United States who are *dying* to be part of this country and they weren't able to before now." (my emphasis)

It is acknowledged that the tanking economy in the United States, with our rising rates of unemployment, is also helping the armed services meet their recruiting quotas, just as lowering the educational, medical and criminal background standards has recently served the same purpose.

But still more enlisting devices are needed now that President Obama is committing 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan.

None of them, however, are whom Jesus primarily had in mind, I think, when he taught the truth about gaining life but losing it and losing life but gaining it.

Jesus could, however, have had primarily in mind those Americans who don't care that their government is engaged in activities causing young people to take their own lives or dope themselves up to cope with battle stress or luring them, by what I think are

deceptive means, into the very conditions that can lead to suicide, severe depression and drug use.

That's because those Americans have been led to think that all they have to care for is their own selves. And that turns out to be a lot of people in this country—people who have bought into, whether upon deep examination or casual and almost unconscious commitment, a comprehensive philosophy of self-interest.

It means that one really doesn't have to get very concerned at all about the tens of thousands of civilian deaths in Iraq, let alone more than 4,000 deaths of U.S. service personnel, or the rising death toll of civilians in Afghanistan, or the 1,300 deaths of innocent residents of Gaza and thousands of traumatized children caused by the recent Israeli military action there.

It means that one really doesn't have to get very concerned about the thousands of individuals and families without health insurance within our own borders—until one loses one's own job and confronts the loss of one's own benefits.

It means that one really doesn't have to get very concerned about the vast inequalities of educational opportunities and resources for children based on their family's ZIP code, their family's financial standing, their family's ethnicity—even if we recognize that education is the fundamental tool, over the long haul, for achieving greater equality in the nation.

All of that in a nation in which a large portion of the population claims to be devoted to a teacher who taught that it's only by losing oneself that one gains real life.

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I don't think I'm unusual in normally thinking that Jesus' teaching about gaining and losing/losing and gaining life means sacrificing everything. In the context in which he is supposed to have said it—coming to terms with what it meant to be God's Chosen One—sacrificing life itself is clearly what he meant for himself and those who would choose to follow him. And I continue to understand that there can be occasions in life where that's the decision one has to make.

But I've come increasingly to see that if we think that's solely what Jesus meant, then we're really getting off pretty easily, especially in most Western societies where no ultimate sacrifice is required for being a follower of Jesus.

So I've come to ponder the possibility that this teaching of Jesus about losing and gaining life might mean, at least for many if not most of us, that we are to lose at least a little of our lives in order to gain a lot, or that we are to lose more of our lives in order to gain more of life, or that we are to lose a lot more of our lives in order to gain much more of life.

But lose a little or a lot of our lives for what?

One way of reading Jesus' teaching is to keep it general: lose your life to something outside of or beyond yourself—give up some of yourself to a cause, any cause; or give some of yourself to an activity that allows you to lose self-preoccupation at least for awhile; or give up some of yourself to another, or to others, maybe those in need or less fortunate than yourself.

Jesus, however, didn't keep it at that general level, even if he might have agreed with it in principle. He was specific about what it is that one loses oneself to in order to gain life: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life *for my sake*, and *for the sake of the gospel*, will save it."

His "sake" was not, of course, himself but the mission he understood God had chosen for him, the mission that defined his identity, his self-understanding. And that "sake" becomes clearer when he adds "for the sake of the gospel" to which he was giving himself and to which he was inviting others.

In Mark and the other synoptic gospels, that "sake" or that "cause" was the incoming kingdom or reign of God. That's what Jesus was losing himself to and inviting others to lose themselves to: an inclusive community, according to Jesus, in which love and care for one another is the central and supreme characteristic.

If I'm understanding this correctly, it would mean that following Jesus today in the United States could involve losing a little, or some, or maybe a lot of oneself to opposing wars that cause soldiers to kill and drug themselves, to challenging recruitment policies that lure immigrants into the military with promises of accelerated citizenship, to objecting to our nation's complicity in dehumanizing Palestinians, destroying their homes and their livelihoods, traumatizing their children, and taking their lives.

It would also mean losing a little, or some, or maybe a lot of oneself in efforts to provide health care for all residents in our country, to help people keep their homes and jobs, and to work for changes in tax and educational policies that would give poor kids the resources they need to become full and productive citizens in our land.

Most of us who claim to be followers of Jesus don't have to die in order to gain authentic life, according to this understanding of his teachings. But it does require us to lose at least a little, or maybe even a lot, if everyone is to gain a little or a lot of life.