

LENT II

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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. ' Mark 8: 35-36

In a few moments we will welcome William Wesley Boucher into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism. As always, what a joyous occasion this is for all of us here at St. John's, and for the wider Church.

However, the text I've just quoted from Mark's Gospel doesn't sound all that cheery, does it? Being a follower of Jesus, Mark has Jesus tell us, means to pick up our crosses, to lose our lives, and these may not seem very inviting words to young William, or those who sponsor and answer for him this morning. What are we signing him up for, after all?

Well, I would first remind us all that there's no guarantee Jesus actually said these words. Mark puts them into Jesus' mouth: Mark, writing decades after Jesus had died, when the manner of Jesus death (on a cross) was well known and when followers of Jesus were an endangered species themselves. Today, when we pledge our children or ourselves to become followers of Jesus, we do not imagine that we are imperiling our lives to do so. Nor are we, generally. Rarely, in joining a Christian community, do we literally lose our lives.

But I want to suggest this morning some more metaphorical – indeed, sacramental – ways in which we may lose our lives when we become followers of Jesus. And to do that I'd like to talk a bit about my mother, Sally Fowler, who as most of you know by now, died a week ago at the age of 88. I warned you last week that I suspected she would show up in a sermon, or sermons, and here she is already!

My mother was a lifelong Episcopalian. Her great-grandfather built the church where her mother, and she, and I, and my daughter, and legions of other family members were baptized. But I don't think the accident of her birth into the Episcopal Church meant much for a life of faith for her, for many years. When I was young she belonged to the Garden Club at St Mary's parish, and by the time I was in highschool she served on the Altar Guild. Her contributions were practical. And I remember her telling me once, during those years, that she envied me my faith.

But my "faith" at the time was an adolescent, self-conscious, piety, I think. Or was it? Certainly, as a wise mother, she perhaps saw something in me that I did not yet

see in myself. For my highschool graduation present she gave me, not the standard dictionary or thesaurus, but a dyptich— an icon of the Annunciation— Mary and the Angel Gabriel—, which she bought for me in Italy. It sits on the mantle in my study today.

Several years ago, a colleague took a group of us through a meditation to help me understand how it may be for people contemplating the end of life – he asked us to imagine giving up: giving up activities, hopes, relationships, and things. What thing, he asked, would we find it most difficult to part with? And into my mind came that icon. So perhaps my mother knew something about my faith back then that I was many years from comprehending.

In any event, my mother’s own life of faith developed. She began to study Christianity. She began to take on leadership roles in her parish, becoming eventually, as I said last week, the first woman senior warden in the Diocese of Maine. She served on two major diocesan committees, the Standing Committee, which acts as the Bishop’s counsel of advice and legal representative if the Bishop is unable to function; and on the Committee on Holy Orders, which supervises those seeking ordination. When I talked to our former rector from St Mary’s about preaching at her funeral service he said, “Of course. She brought me up! She was my rock!”

Who of us, really, imagines the life that we end up living? From one viewing, my mother lived absolutely the life that might have been predicted for her: privileged, upper-middle class, member of the Junior League, trustee of the Portland Art Museum and the Maine Medical Center, as well as mother of five children, an accomplished sailor, skier, gardener, and needlewoman. All that she might well have foreseen for herself.

But I think, truly, when she entered deeply and fully into life as a practicing Christian and faithful Episcopalian, she lost her life as she had known it and entered another dimension. Or added another dimension. And that often felt like a loss to her, I think.

What did she lose? Well, she lost personal time –time she devoted to her parish and to the wider church. She lost a certain commonality with my father, who was, as he proudly and frequently proclaimed, a practitioner of “healthy skepticism. “

But most of all, I think, she lost – or rather, she had to give up – many of her native assumptions. A couple of examples.

When I came home to announce that I was leaving my first husband, my father said, “We don’t get divorced in this family. “ I believe my mother more or less agreed

with that, but she said to me on the same occasion, “I’m trying to listen to you, to understand, and not to judge.” I have no doubt that her growing formation in faith led her to that forbearance and generosity of heart.

When my daughter, sometime in her early twenties, got tired of being asked when she might get married, she wrote my parents a letter to tell them that she imagined her life partner of choice might well be a woman. We both wondered how my parents would respond. And they responded, “You are great. You are wonderful. We love you. We hope you will find someone to make you happy. “ Not bad for a couple born in the early 1920’s.

In 2004, when I was on sabbatical and marriage equality was just becoming an accomplished reality, my dad was dying up in Maine. I came down to do a wedding here – what we call my disobedient wedding, where I would defy the bishop’s direction that Episcopal priests must not sign wedding licenses because our Prayerbook describes marriage as between a man and a woman. But our vestry and I had agreed that I needed, in conscience, to do one wedding of ecclesiastical disobedience, in good conscience with my convictions about full sacramental inclusion in our church.

My father died the evening before that wedding, and I thought I ‘d have to return to Maine to be with my family. But then they called. My sister said, “You’ve been waiting 20 years to do that wedding. Stay and do it. We’ll be fine.” Then my mother got on the phone. “You know what your father would want you to do,” she said. So of course, I stayed.

When my daughter got pregnant a year and a half ago with the help of assisted reproductive technology we wondered what my mother, then 87 and with a fair degree of dementia, would be able to take in. She told me, ‘You know, sometimes modern stuff is a drag. But this is great!’

After last November’s election, I asked Mum, a lifelong Republican, what she thought of our new president. She got a bit shifty-eyed, wondering, I imagine, *what’s the right answer for my leftie daughter?* Then she said, “I think he’s great. This is a country for all the people.”

My mother was not always an easy woman, by any means, not *sweet* by any means, not always reasonable. But she was *faithful*. She never gave up on her family, her friends, her parish, or the wider Church. She had no patience for people who would leave St Mary’s because of a rector they didn’t like or some parish quarrel. She believed in

sticking around, and her example became for me the very model of Christian discipleship.

I believe that my mother's story as a follower of Jesus was a continual journey of losing life as she had expected and known it –losing it to some degree – and gaining another life. A life more expansive, more inclusive, more bold, more generous, more forgiving. Moreover, she was fundamentally an introvert and a very, very private person, whose life of faith invited, indeed demanded, that she reach out to others in risky and sacrificial ways. She was always seeking to draw nearer, in her own way, to those she loved and cared for, and she loved and cared for many of God's strange and wonderful children.

Well, I've spoken a great deal about Sally Fowler this morning, and not so much about William Wesley Boucher. But I am mindful that the occasion of his baptism brings together for the first time the families of his two mothers, and what a particularly joyful moment that is, therefore, for Gretchen and Mary Alison. And I know in my heart that Sally Fowler is smiling on this moment with all the experience and wisdom of her own life, her understanding of a faithful and sacramental life of continual forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and inclusion

And it is that life—that sacramental life, that life of continual forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and inclusion— into which we welcome William Wesley this morning. We pledge ourselves to live that life with him, to be his companions in faith as he loses life, and gains it, in the name of Christ.

Amen.