

“Nothing Shall Be Lost”
John 6:35-40

When he was a teenager, my father bought a brush from the “Fuller brush man” who came knocking at the door. The brush was nearly square, about three inches by four inches, with bristles about an inch and a quarter long; the handle was about three and a half inches. It was brown with streaks of caramel. I can give this detailed description because it was, and probably is, my father’s most prized possession. It went wherever he went; on overnight trips or long vacations; and move after move after move. Our family moved seven times from when I born until I left home, and there are maybe a dozen things that were constant, among them a desk, two cradles, a bed, a kitchen table and chairs – and that brush. If it was ever missing, it was a family emergency. “I can’t find my brush! Help me find my brush!” We would look in corners, in drawers, under beds – anywhere that small nearly square brush could have dropped. You could not buy a replacement; no other brush had quite the gentle sweep. It was imperative that *it not be lost*.

There some things that we dare not lose. This year I inherited my grandmother’s piano, given to her by her mother – five generations now are learning to play that piano. I dare not lose it. But more than that, it came with the original lifetime warranty, from the Warren Piano Company of Warren Pennsylvania; and it came with the letter, written to my great-grandmother, that accompanied the purchase of the instrument, promising that she would “appreciate the fine craftsmanship and the piano would give her reliable service for years to come.” I dare not lose these pieces of paper. I thought I had lost them—our house is not nearly the most organized—and I scoured the house looking for it. Like the woman the whole house upside down looking for a lost coin, like my father looking for a brush, I went through every pile and box until I found it. And I put it in a safe place, at least I hope it’s safe and won’t be lost again.

Losing is a part of life. Losing things that are precious to us is how it goes. Sometimes it’s a brush or a piece of paper, a small watch or a book. The thing itself is not important, but what it symbolizes: connection to family, or to someone we love, a legacy that lives on in us, a symbol of lives, or of our place in the world. We treasure these things, and then one day they are gone. Then again, there are far more precious things that we lose in life. People, homes, innocence, health, independence. The list could go on and on. In pastoral work, I often sit with those who are losing, losing their marriage, losing their health, losing a spouse, losing their freedom. I spoke with an older man recently who shared that he cried in the hospital when they tried to put him on a gurney and he could do nothing to help himself. He had spent a lifetime helping, and now was helpless. His independence, and along with it much of his identity was lost. There are some things we dare not lose, but then we do.

The gospel of John, this book we’re studying chapter by chapter, is about what is lost, or rather *not* lost. In chapter three we read those great words, emblazoned on the collective consciousness and hung up on banners at football games: “For God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Should not perish – *should not be lost*.

Two great miracles open this sixth chapter: the feeding of the five thousand, when Jesus took a boys’ lunch and turned into a feast for the masses. And after that the disciples rowed out

into the Sea of Tiberias, and Jesus came walking out on the water and met them. The disciples saw these signs and believed. These miracles were signs, like we consider winning the lottery ticket or getting a really good parking place, they were signs that boosted their faith. But the signs weren't the *real thing*. Over and over in John, Jesus is trying to get us to go beneath the surface to the deeper spiritual truth. Don't look at the feat of walking on water, look at the *one* who is doing it. Don't look at the bread, look at *one* who breaks it. Look at Jesus. Look at the one who says, "I am the bread of life."

After he says that, Jesus utters a line that speaks so powerfully to our experience of loss. "*This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.*" This is the clue to the heart of Jesus message. Whosoever believes in me will not perish but have everlasting life . . . *I should lose nothing of all that has been given to me.* You remember the signs we seen in this gospel: but what is wine, even wine made by a miracle, if it is eventually gone? What is bread, even bread multiplied by a miracle, if it is ultimately lost? The mission of Jesus Christ is to do far more than work signs and miracles, far more than to simply help us. I don't say that to discount the help that we receive from Christ. When someone is sick and undone by disease and addiction, by all means pray. When life is coming apart at the seams, by all means pray. When there is no food to put on the table, by all means pray. But Christ came to do far more than just help us, he came to *save* us.

The experience of loss tells us, shouts to us, that we need more than just a little help. In his famous meditation for whom the bell tolls, John Donne compares all of life, our lives individually and as a community, to a continent that is being slowly washed away, or a house that is crumbling down. In that most famous passage, he writes: "*No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*" In a deep sense, life is loss and the bell is always tolling, and this is exactly why Jesus came save. "*This is the will of the Father,*" he says, "*that I should lose none of all he has given me.*"

Let me say the same thing in a positive way: what is entrusted to Christ is safe forever. What is entrusted to Christ is safe forever. No experience that is given to Christ will be ultimately be lost. No joy, no achievement, no accomplishment, will be lost when it is entrusted to Christ's keeping. No sorrow, no pain, no deep grief, will be wasted when it is entrusted to Christ's care. What is entrusted to Christ is safe forever. No *one* that is given to Christ will ultimately be lost. No parent, no brother or sister, no husband or wife, no child – whether young or old – who is entrusted to Christ will be lost forever. For Christ will raise all that is given to him up on the last day, raise it, redeem it, perfect it – everything that has been given to him in faith, everyone who has come to him in faith – will be safe forever.

Today, we have baptized two children, Stella and Claire. They have been given to Christ, entrusted to his eternal keeping. When you bring a child into the world there are no guarantees. When a baby is born, every noise wakes you up, you watch closely to make sure they're breathing. You try to provide as much of a cocoon as possible, but it can't last forever. At some point every person must join the stream of life, hopefully to know joy we cannot imagine, and also to experience losses we cannot foresee. Isla and Luke at their young age of four years old have been wrestling with death. When someone we know has died, they have

asked: "John died?" Yes, we say, "John died. He was very old." They answer, "But we won't die?" We tell them, "Not for a long, long time." Of course, unspoken in those words are these three: "We desperately hope."

Ultimately we cannot preserve our children; we cannot even preserve ourselves. The bells tolls, and we must hear it toll for us and the ones we love the most. But here is what we can do: we can entrust ourselves and our children, and all that is worth saving, to the one who can keep it safe forever.

"The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes; That soul though all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake." It is the Father's will that Christ lose nothing that has been given to him.

In that same meditation I quoted earlier, John Donne compares our lives to a book, whose chapters and pages have been torn out over time. A book that is scattered and worn. But then, looking to Christ's promise, he writes, *"[God's] hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again, for that library where every book shall lie open to one another."*

Thanks be to God, Christ shall gather the scattered pages of our lives, and all that has been given to him he shall raise and keep safe forever. Amen.

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On the Occasion of the Baptism of My Daughter, Claire Catherine