

*Whoever would save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?*

This passage frames the paradox which is at the heart of Western civilization. The way to the best in life is to serve others. Your life is more fulfilling if you give it away, if you spend it for a cause that’s bigger than yourself. The way to self-fulfillment is indirect. It’s a paradox because all of us have a natural reflex to draw back when we appear to be threatened or to watch out for “number one.”

This issue appears to be in contention on the current national scene. I think it was the former failed Democratic Party nominee, John Kerry, who put it starkly at the convention when, in a memorable line, he said, “the world has always been more impressed with the power of our example than with the example of our power.” It is the conflict between western values and western interests in a post 9-11 world that you can watch for in the Republican convention’s attempt to respond as we try to negotiate a common national agreement on foreign policy. Or perhaps it is simply a rhetorical trope and western interest inevitably ends up trumping western values.

For instance: while we are all for eliminating global poverty, we’re unwilling to reduce agricultural subsidies that harm the poorest in the world. Or while we rush to exercise leadership in vocally addressing global warming, we remain unwilling to accept any responsibility for the greenhouse gas emissions we’ve already put into the atmosphere since the Industrial Revolution. It is a kind of double standard sometimes called “American Exceptionalism” though it is by no means limited to the US.

Whether on a global stage or interpersonally, we are likely to pay lip service to the notion of serving others at our own expense, while we continue to maintain a power structure where we are advantaged and our self-interest is privileged. It’s human nature. That’s just how we’re wired. Sometimes we’re comfortable with compromises that amount to what we call “enlightened self interest.” One example I see a lot is what we know as “community service.” Every school in our area for some time has required community service hours or credits for graduation. Some kids are really changed by this experience, but often the engagement is minimal and the motivation usually remains something like, “this will look good on my resume and anyway, it’s required.”

Every year we get acquainted with students who are looking for community service, and what I often see is how transformed they can be by that time they spend at workcamp or at Camp Create or in some of our other activities. It can really surprise them. Occasionally a kid will move toward a life of service. Something in them will click, and they will become addicted to the “rush” of giving to others.

Generosity is not natural. We don't come wanting to share or spend time with social outcasts. What comes naturally is selfish hoarding and penurious self-protection, closing our hands to the needs of others. And it is that closed hand that forms the fist that can so easily be used reflexively, usually because of a fear of losing what we have.

But when Jesus says "those who lose their life will find it," he's not just talking about that taking-up-of-the-cross that refers to faith in his saving death and resurrection. He's declaring a universal law, related to meaning and fulfillment in life. To be fully alive we need a passion, something that drives us beyond our selves and our own self interest, and even beyond our own families. We need to give our lives away in the service of a cause beyond our work, a need. We all need what the church calls a ministry.

Janet and I and our kids all spent Tuesday evenings at Bridge the Gap Tutoring in Marin City. It was just what we did. Sometimes it was very demanding, really challenging and frustrating. But I can't imagine what our personal lives and our family life would have been like without the perspective that the discipline of meeting each week with a struggling minority child provided us. There's no way we could have paid for the benefits we got from giving away our time and effort. It has benefitted us way more than it has cost us. Janet and I still go every Tuesday evening, as do a number of you.

The Church is a community that helps to build character in its members. We build HEAVEN into each other by encouraging one another to overcome the resistance of the world to service. I know that stiff headwind of resistance very well and so do you. One of my favorite objections is so common you hear all the time: "Isn't that a wasteful way to have an impact, to make a difference. So many struggling kids, so many poor, hungry people, how can you justify how little impact you have."

STARFISH STORY: A boy is walking down the beach one day after a storm has blown in and left it full of hundreds of starfish. The sun is so hot and the tide so low that left high and dry, they'll all soon die. The little boy is picking them up one by one and throwing them back into the ocean. A man walks up to him and says, "So many, how can you make any difference at all." The little boy replied as he throws the next one, "Made a difference to that one."

And its even more profound than that. We give, we offer our gifts in service, not primarily because others need us or because we will make a difference. Though we have a responsibility to be as effective as we can. But more than that, we serve because of what it does to us. It humanizes us, it fills us with joy, it really gives us life. It is always more life-giving to give than it is to receive. That's the message we offer.

Everybody has gifts, things that we're born with, that we have developed because people noticed them and affirmed us or just because they make us feel good. And each of us has skills, things we've learned or become good at over time, things we may even get paid to do. And we all have passions or dreams. I for instance am passionate about enabling elders to stay in their homes, in their communities as long as they can.

Now I want to invite you to turn to the person next to you and interview them for a few minutes about their gifts and let them interview you about yours. We want to begin a conversation about our giftedness as a congregation and begin to stir each other up, as the scripture says to good works, to sharing with the community what we've been.