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*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church  
September 12, 2021; Mark 8:27-38*

How many of you know what an “intervention” is? We are going to do something completely untraditional—I actually would love it if someone would answer the question. Out loud. Introverts, don’t worry, no one has to say anything if you don’t want to. So OK, what’s an intervention? What’s the goal of an intervention?

At one point in my life, I gathered with a close group to address what to us looked like the alcoholism of one our loved ones. We hired someone to help us with this process. He had us each write a letter to the loved one stating how their drinking had impacted us. When the time came to meet with the addict, we had thought we were supposed to read those letters. But what actually happened is that the Interventionist, having read all of our letters, gently named some themes he saw in our group that together with the drinking were all part of an overall pattern that was stuck. So what we had thought was the goal of the Intervention, to get our loved one to quit drinking, turned out not to be the whole story. The work wasn’t just for the drinker. It was for all of us. It turned out our group also had communication and control issues. And oddly, I don’t know how to explain this, but somehow that released a lot of the intensity about the whole situation. We could let go just a little bit of this terrible yearning for the alcoholic to quit drinking and start taking care of

what we could control instead. With humility and acknowledging the whole truth came a certain lightness and peace.

If you're anything like me, you've probably had situations where you truly didn't recognize that what you told yourself about a person or a situation wasn't the whole story. But when we do recognize this, and become open to seeing more deeply, a world of healing and life becomes possible that wouldn't have been otherwise.

In today's gospel reading Jesus asks his disciples to take a look at the story they've been telling themselves about who he is, and about what being a disciple means. It turns out they didn't quite see things clearly. Maybe they had thought he would be the one to overthrow Roman rule of Israel. This story from Mark 8 comes right after another story, in which Jesus heals a blind man—in stages. In that story, Jesus first touches the blind man's eyes, but the man can only see people that look like trees walking around. But after Jesus repeats the healing touch, the man can see clearly. Similarly, in the reading from today, Jesus is inviting the disciples to become clear about how they are seeing him, but it doesn't happen all at once. It also happens in stages. They begin with considering how others see Jesus, to how they see him, what it actually means that he is the Messiah, and finally, what it actually means to be a disciple.

And it turns out the whole thing seems very upside down. Jesus is the Messiah; but they aren't supposed to tell anyone that, and being a Messiah means he will be rejected and suffer and die, and then rise from the dead. Being a disciple seems also to be confounding. When you try to save your life, you lose it; and when you lose your life for the sake of

Jesus and the gospel, you save it. At first it may just sound like an invitation to a literal or figurative martyr's life. But then Jesus asks a profound question: What will it profit you to gain the whole world and give up your life? The Greek word for life here could also be translated "soul"—so imagine Jesus asking, What will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your soul? Jesus is not probably talking about the afterlife here, but about the experience of the boundless, eternal life of God on this earth, in the deepest part of who you are. There is such a thing as having everything, and being utterly impoverished. But still, what can Jesus mean by losing your life for the sake of the gospel? How can that be good news?

In today's world, September 2021, we at St. John's have been talking for a few years now about being a disciple of Jesus through following the Way of Love. If you don't remember, the Way of Love is comprised of seven spiritual practices that show the shape of Christian life—turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go and rest. But if we see these Way of Love practices through the lens of Jesus' teaching in today's gospel reading, it may become decidedly less appealing. Almost everyone I know is so exhausted from this pandemic, and the endless uncertainty and having to reinvent the wheel to do things we used to be able to do on autopilot, that the idea of denying ourselves to give more might not sound like good news at all. We are already wrestling hard with some things right now. We have issues in our personal lives, and we are also wrestling hard with issues in the world around us—the current debate about public safety in Minneapolis since the murder of George Floyd, the climate crisis, and on and on it goes. In this context, what can be good news about Jesus' invitation to deny ourselves and follow him?

Jesus implies here that things are not as they appear. The story we make up about what life itself is might need some shifting. Here's what I do know. When I have even briefly let go of my own intense desires and narratives about things, and have sought to be open to guidance beyond the best my brain can come up with, there is often a surprising sense of lightness, and sometimes even play, that is truly good news. I believe this is because there actually is a Power greater than ourselves who is love, who is accessible to us, and who can guide us if we will relinquish control even a little. Perhaps Jesus saying we need to "deny ourselves" is not just about being willing to be generous, although that's important. It's not just to consider the needs of others as being as important as our own, which is part of what it means to love. It's not just about using our privilege to benefit those who don't have it, or about working hard for things that matter, because that is part of the cross that we are called to carry. Perhaps most deeply, denying ourselves to follow Jesus means also to have a humble acceptance that we don't always get it right, and to know that the more we cling to anything—including not just what we try to save and protect, but also our opinions about what is right, and our condemnation of those we judge as guilty—the less life and joy and freedom we actually have. Perhaps Jesus is asking us to go past the surface of things—even how we usually think about our own identities—and instead touch the deepest part of ourselves. The truest part of who we are is that beautiful core God created and called good, the core that overflows with love and generosity when we truly learn to follow Jesus, to follow a genuine spiritual Master, Healer, Liberator, and friend. Perhaps Jesus' teaching to deny ourselves and follow him is about coming from a place of acceptance and openness, even as we engage in the

struggles of this world, knowing there is a Power greater than ourselves that can offer us guidance, and rest, and even play.

Your wonderful former Rector Mariann Budde, who is now the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Washington D.C., said this in a recent sermon—and thanks to Rex for pointing it out to me. She said:

We can live with peace at the center of our being even as we are called to engage the turbulence around us.<sup>1</sup>

To follow Jesus involves this paradox of peace at the center and engaging the turbulence around us. The peace comes from who Jesus is, and from our own humble willingness be open to the love of God in Christ. That love turns things upside down, in which saving and clinging looks like losing, and in which giving away looks like saving. In that love, we can take a deeper look at ourselves and all that is around us. We can let go, truly seek the presence of God's Spirit, and follow where She leads—to take up our crosses and engage the world around us.

I imagine if you're like me, in any given moment there are particular things or issues in your life that you're clinging to pretty tightly. It may be a relationship issue, or an issue in our society that keeps you up at night, or a struggle with health or loss or anxiety or even your own less than perfect coping mechanisms. Whatever it is, who have you been in this situation, and who do you want to be? What might God be inviting you to become? What might it look like to allow your perceptions to be turned

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<sup>1</sup> Mariann Budde, "Discovering the Gospel of Your Life," preached at Washington National Cathedral on August 29, 2021, viewed at <https://cathedral.org/service-archive/>, beginning at 39:40.

upside down—to let go of your normal habits of thinking, pick up what is in fact yours to carry, and ask for the guidance of God? The answers may involve some change, and some letting go. But you might also gain your soul. Amen.