

I worked for ten years with a man named Thanh who had been a colonel in the South Vietnamese Army. Thanh told me about April 30, 1975, the day the Communists arrived in his country, the day when nearly one million people managed to get evacuated.

Thanh wasn't one of those lucky people. He was in Pleiku, in central Viet Nam, when he received orders to stop fighting. After releasing his soldiers, he said he seriously considered suicide but didn't have enough courage to pull the trigger. Thanh wanted the oblivion he believed suicide would bring, but he didn't yet know this **lesson about life**, that **life is forever**.

Instead, he took off his uniform and threw away all his military equipment, even his boots. Wearing only his pajamas, barefooted, with no food or water, he walked from Pleiku into PhuBon forest, desolate high country, as he tried to reach Cambodia.

Of the trek, Thanh said, "I saw a lot of dead people, terrible things, and starving people trying to escape." He survived by eating leaves, the ones he saw the birds eat.

One incident brings Thanh's story to my mind today. He encountered a man and his wife arguing about whether to abandon their infant son. When Thanh appeared, the man ran away. Apparently, the man thought his chances of survival were better on his own. Thanh decided to help the woman and baby, more as a way of sure suicide than from altruism. But, miraculously, they survived. And, as they were leaving the forest, they encountered the corpse of the man who had abandoned his wife and child.

"That's when," Thanh told me, "I learned the meaning of this saying of Jesus, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lost their life for Jesus' sake and the sake of the gospel will save it."

That saying contains a **lesson about life**: To save our life we need to give our life up. And when we give our life up, for Jesus' sake, we get new life, a better life, a truer life, beginning right here and now. And we need this new life, because **life is forever**.

"But wait," you're bound to point out, "Thanh wasn't even a Christian then, so how could he have been doing Jesus' work?"

Yes, we like our Jesus-workers to be unambiguously identified as they bring the Kingdom of God into reality. But, isn't helping someone else always Jesus' work?

Here is Thanh's **lesson about life**: He traces his "new life" to the moment he chose to put his own welfare second to those of the woman and baby, even if that choice was for the wrong reason. And from there to a ten-year stint in a Communist "reeducation" camp, where someone told him about Jesus.

Those who want to save their life will lose it. Aren't we at Resurrection experiencing this very truth of which Jesus spoke? When our goal was to save ourselves, we "failed to thrive." But when we decided to give ourselves away, for Jesus' sake, we began life anew. And that's when I knew we would live—maybe not exactly as we had been, but we would live and thrive and bless others. Isn't this the very definition of our name: Resurrection? Giving our life for something beyond ourselves, for others, and then—surprise—finding that life isn't ended, but transformed as a result?

Jesus told his disciples he had to die, that he was on his way to Jerusalem to suffer there, to be rejected, and to die. He said he "must" go, that this was "necessary."

Isaiah 53:5-6 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 tell us what Jesus meant. Jesus took our guilt and sins on himself and redeemed them so that our lives can be whole. Jesus had to die to accomplish his mission with us.

We, too, must embrace our physical death and see our death as a necessary transition, a new beginning. Oblivion doesn't await, as Thanh used to think, but a different life, because **life is forever**.

The question is, what kind of life will we choose? Will we live for ourselves, for short-term gain? Will we hoard what we have so that the status quo we love will continue? Jesus warns us to not settle for "gaining the whole world" in this life, but rather to live the kind of life here that leads us well into our next life.

Spiritually speaking, when we choose Christ Jesus we die in this life BEFORE our physical death. As Paul said in Galatians (2:20), "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." I no longer choose my actions, but the Holy Spirit guides my life. Isn't this what we mean here at Resurrection when we pledge to be Christ Jesus' hands, voices, and hearts, in our community and in our world?

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus urges his disciples—urges us—to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. He means for us to die to ourselves and to live for him. He means for us to be under his management, to allow our interior to be transformed. We get a new heart. We get open eyes. We get a new spirit.

And sometimes we get a new church. In the mid-1990s, Lenore and I were at a conference in Richmond where some frail members of the almost defunct St. Patrick's in Falls Church were petitioning our Bishop and oversight boards to revert from being a self-sufficient parish back to mission status. They needed diocesan funding to continue. BUT, they were excited to share that there were some Vietnamese families who had moved into their neighborhood and had begun attending their church. (I learned later, after meeting Thanh, that his family was among them.) St. Patrick's wanted the time and

money to die to what it had been to live on as an Anglo-Vietnamese congregation. They were afraid of how this change would affect their church but, as they said, they were “taking up their cross and following Jesus.” Just a couple years ago, Lenore and I also were at annual diocesan convention when this now-thriving congregation became a parish again, leaving mission status behind.

As we—Church of the Resurrection—prepare to “take up our cross,” literally and spiritually, and receive new life, think about what you might need to let die in your life to be able to experience new life.