

The message for Sunday, May 25, by Elder Lee Rozen

“Consider Everything a Loss”

Old Testament: Isaiah 40:25-31

Epistle: Philippians 3:7-11

Gospel: Matthew 10:29-31

So, my truck, my garage and my home office are organized better today than they have been in months. It is really amazing what you can accomplish when you are looking for ways to put off writing a sermon.

Well, tomorrow, as we know, is Memorial Day. It's a paid holiday for almost everyone. And for most, it is the long weekend that signals the start of the summer vacation season. Originally, of course, it was a day set aside in 1868, shortly after the Civil War, as a time to remember those Union soldiers who had given their lives for their country. In the beginning, and for many decades it was known as Decoration Day, a time to put flowers on the graves of fallen soldiers.

Today, for many, it is still a day for remembering those who have been lost, those who are not with us any more, to honor them for what they have done, to grieve for them, for their absence. And there is also the sense of celebrating what they have done for us, for the life that they gave – for the life that they lived – so that we who remain and we who came after them would have a better life.

We are also still in the Easter season this Sunday, and we will be for a couple of more Sundays. We are remembering still that Christ gave his life for us. We are remembering how the apostles grieved for their loss, how few of them understood what he had been trying to tell them was going to happen to him. We read that they also were confused, doubting, unsure, even unaware when he appeared to them. And then we remember how excited they became, how joyful and energetic to spread the Good News as they realized he had miraculously returned from death to be with them a while longer.

We read how it was a life changing thing for them and many other new believers.

Now, many things puzzle me, and that has been one of them. How can anything be life changing? Even life threatening illnesses aren't necessarily life-changing. The doctors go in and cut something out, or sew it up, or flood your body with poisons or zap it with radiation. These days the chances often are good that you'll come out the other side. And when you are done, you are still you. There was no personality transplant involved. Nothing there necessarily forces us to look at the world differently.

At least that was my point of view, which I was quite willing to share with my wife, at least. Somehow, I never got the impression that this was exactly her point of view.

But I've come to believe that God has a droll sense of humor with a bit of appreciation for

slapstick.

Three times in about five years in the '90s, I heard doctors tell me, "Well now, this is really interesting. Not what I see every day." That's not what you want to hear from your doctor. The first two times, the next words were, "It's lucky we caught it so early." And that was a relief, of course. The last time, my only grand mal seizure ever, almost literally involved a whack upside the head that left me stunned for several weeks.

So, I thought, maybe I'm being given a message – like getting the donkey's attention with a 2x4. "You've been away from church since you were 18. Now your kids are teenagers. You need to be back in worship."

So I went. And was very glad that I did. As a parent of teenagers, I found the prayer of confession and especially the assurance of forgiveness very comforting.

Over the next few years, one Bible passage, however, troubled me. It was the parable of the rich young man who was told to sell all that he had, give it to the poor and follow Jesus. I wasn't wealthy in the context of metropolitan Seattle, but I sure wasn't poor, even there – and in the context of the rest of the world I was very materially rich.

Then in January 2009, the Hearst Corporation put the Seattle Post-Intelligencer newspaper – where I had worked for 25 years – up for sale. Hearst said that if it couldn't sell the P-I in a month, it would close. My co-workers knew that meant 170 people would soon lose their jobs, because no one would buy it. And we put out our resumes.

I got a call from a Microsoft recruiter who asked if I could manage a team of five people. I told her I was managing 30 at the moment and wasn't really looking to manage just five. We had no further conversations.

No one offered to buy the newspaper. In early March, we were told the P-I would close in a week on March 17. Most of us stayed to the end to collect our severance and write our own career obituary.

I walked away with nearly a year's pay, free classes on finding a job, a personal coach – and four tightly held beliefs:

1. I was done working in newspapers.
2. At 60, I had skills that would transfer to corporate communications or something similar at pay and benefits close to what I had been making.
3. I would stay in western Washington where I'd lived all my life to be close to family, including our church family.
4. I had a strong faith and would hold onto that through the process.

I sent out dozens upon dozens of applications for various kinds of corporate communications positions. I received two or three calls of interest. It didn't go beyond that. For the first time in my life, I began to feel totally worthless, and even had a fleeting thought of suicide.

After one particularly dispiriting week, Sydney and I decided over a dinner at our favorite Mexican place that I really needed to try a new strategy. We weren't sure what that was though.

When we got home, I found a new job opening for the Communications Director for University Presbyterian Church in downtown Seattle. University Prez has more staff than our suburban church had members. As you can imagine, I thought I saw God's hand at work. About seven interviews later, someone else got the job.

A couple of months later, my pastor encouraged me to apply for director of the local senior center, one of the most active in the Seattle area and where he was on the board. I figured my age finally would work for me. After several interviews, I didn't get the job.

So, in the spring of 2010, my unemployment eligibility was running out, the P-I's severance payment was nearly used up. We were running out of COBRA eligibility for a really nice health plan that was just starting to cost us \$1,600 a month.

And I'd just been rejected as the new managing editor of the Lewiston Tribune for some in-house candidate.

As it turned out, that meant the Daily News managing editor job came open.

To put that in context, a few months earlier I'd decided against even applying for a editor's job way off in Indiana and a college PR job in McMinnville, Ore. – near our grandkids – when I'd heard their salaries. Salaries that were nearly identical to what the Daily News was offering.

Still, I'd liked Butch and Nathan Alford when I interviewed at the Tribune, and I was no longer the cocky big city editor who could turn down a job because I wasn't going to be managing enough people to suit my ego. I was offered the Daily News job nearly as soon as I persuaded them I was interested in it.

I was back in newspapers. We were moving away from everyone we knew. We did some strange things with money to make it happen. And four years later, we know it was the right thing to do.

We have a new church family, as dear to us as ever our Bothell family was, and we are even closer to our grandkids here – five blocks – than we were before. Money is a funny thing. Today, for us, the more easily we give it away, the less it seems to be a worry.

I had thought it was time to give up daily journalism. But God knew that was the gift he had given me to use, and that was what I had to pass on to a new generation.

It was the other stuff I needed to get rid of. He knew that for Sydney and me to grow as Christians we needed to leave almost all our other comfort zones. We needed to be where we were relying even more on Him for help and guidance.

Here I've become a Stephen Minister, something I would never have considered in Seattle,

even though our church there had such a program. The decision – to try something so outside my comfort zone, to go through the training and the ongoing education and supervision, to walk alongside people in crisis – has added new depth to both my faith and my friendships.

So, not only do we feel that our faith in His attention to us – to the hairs on our head – was justified, but that we had to give up the old things to experience the new.

As the Message translates the Philippians passage: “The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I’m tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life.”

That's pretty life-changing. And, you know, the harder I tried to hang onto what I thought was important from my previous life – and losing that job felt like I had lost a life – the more impossible it became to move forward.

I had to give up even the hope of those things to gain a new life, in almost all ways a better life. It's a life more filled with not only those things that God wants from me and for me, but also those things that I find fulfilling, challenging and loving.

Each time we experience loss and grief, and try to move forward from that, God seems to say that it is essential that we try to discern not only what his Way for us is – but also what he is asking us to leave behind.

Amen.