

## LOSE YOUR LIFE TO SAVE IT

Jerry lived in the Louisiana Cajun country. Jerry was born and raised a Baptist, and each Friday right after work he would fire up his outdoor grill and cook a big venison steak.

All of Jerry's neighbors were Roman Catholic, and since it was Lent, they were forbidden to eat meat on Fridays. The delicious aroma from the grilled venison steaks was causing such a problem for the Catholics that they finally talked to their priest.

The priest came to visit Jerry, and suggested that Jerry convert to Catholicism. After several classes and much study, Jerry attended mass, and as the priest sprinkled holy water over Jerry, he said, "You were born a Baptist and raised a Baptist, but now you are Catholic."

Jerry's neighbors were greatly relieved, until Friday night arrived, and the wonderful aroma of grilled venison once again filled the neighborhood.

The priest was called immediately by the neighbors and, as he rushed into Jerry's yard, clutching a rosary and ready to scold Jerry, he stopped in amazement and watched.

There stood Jerry, clutching a small bottle of water which he carefully sprinkled over the grilling meat, and chanted: "You were born a deer, and raised a deer, but now you are a catfish."

So, how's your Lent going?

Jesus tells us, in this morning's Gospel reading, that "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

What does that mean? Losing your life to save it. That doesn't seem to make sense, does it. It must be one of those incomprehensible sayings of Jesus.

There's a novel called *The Fall*, written in 1956 by the French existentialist author Albert Camus. It's the story of a person named Jean-Baptiste Clamence. Clamence was a good man, a well-respected citizen, but he had one fundamental flaw – the flaw of egotism. He loved himself too much. Everything revolved around him. He was incapable of giving

himself in love to another human being. He wanted to love, but something within him kept getting in the way. At one point he says of himself, "I, I, I was the theme of my whole life. ...When I was concerned about another person, it was out of condescension."

One night, the night of his fall from grace, he was walking across a bridge over the River Seine in Paris. It's easy to imagine the scene, It was midnight, and he was all bundled up in a trench coat. As he walked across the bridge that night he saw a woman, leaning over the rail, looking down at the water. She too was all alone, a slim, young woman dressed in black. He sensed that she was going to jump off the bridge, commit suicide. He paused, just for a moment, with the thought of helping her, saying a word to her -- anything. He paused -- and walked away. Moments later he heard a body hit the water. He heard a woman crying for help as she floated downstream. He stopped short. He listened. And he did nothing. Gradually the voice of the screaming stopped. There was a devastating silence. He wanted to run but his body wouldn't move. He stood there motionless in the fog. And then he walked away, slowly, cigarette in hand, overcoat collar wrapped around his neck. He told no one.

That was the night of The Fall, the night he fell from love. The night he fell from God. That night was the night he became deeply aware that he was incapable of truly loving another person who was in need of his care. It was the night of The Fall.

Jean-Baptiste Clamence went home, and his conscience started to laugh at him. The memory of that moment haunted him every night. He would hear her screams in the night and he would remember that he did nothing, absolutely nothing. He'd clamp his hands over his ears, hoping her screams would die out, but they never did.

Some time later, Jean-Baptiste was in a bar, one of those Parisian cafes, filled with smoke and people. And in the midst of so many people, he was all alone. His conscience mocked him, whispering quietly, "Tell me, Jean-Baptiste. What happened to you that night on the banks of the Seine, when you would not risk your life? When you paused and did nothing, when you had no feeling?" And Jean-Baptiste said to himself, "O woman, throw yourself into the water a second time, that I might have a second chance to save both of us." But it was too late.

Thus ends of the story of a man who never knew what it meant to lose one's life in order to find it. Thus ends the story of a man who never understood what Jesus meant when he said, "God is love and whoever lives and loves lives in God." "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

A second story, just the opposite. It was a cold, snowy Wednesday in January 1982, in Washington, D.C. Air Florida flight 90 was ready to take off. It had been sitting there on the tarmac an hour or so and no one had checked the wings for icing. The plane, as it took off, clipped the top of the bridge over the Potomac River, and crashed into the icy water. 78 people died instantly. A few people, 6 of them, were able to crawl out onto the wing and yell for help.

Suddenly a rescue helicopter appeared, dropping a lifeline with a life ring at the end of it. One of the people on the wing was a big man in his fifties, portly, with a giant mustache. The man grabbed the life ring, but instead of putting it around himself he put it on one of the other people on the wing. The helicopter flew the rescued person to shore. Then the second person, the third, the fourth, the fifth. Each time the big portly man with the mustache took the life ring and gave it to another. When the helicopter came back the sixth time, the man was gone.

Later the helicopter pilot said, "I have never seen anyone with that kind of commitment in a crisis situation." And later, when they found the body of the man and he was identified, a friend said, "Well, that's the kind of person he was. He was always giving of himself to others for that was the nature of his life."

This man understood. This man understood that God is love and whoever lives in love lives in God, whoever walks in love walks in God. This man understood that no greater love has a person than this, that they are willing to give their life for another. This man understood what it means to lose your life in order to find it.

Poor Jean-Baptiste Clamence never understood.