

The Celebration of the Life of Marilyn Nicholson
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
31 March 2021

John 6:37-40

Thank you for joining us at this celebration of life for Marilyn Nicholson. I had the blessing of speaking to Brian and Andrew several times and I know the love they both had for Marilyn and the love she had for them. Losing someone who by today's standards was still very young is exceedingly painful. There is a void left in our hearts that becomes very difficult to fill. We look for our loved ones in all the usual places, but our arms return to us empty. The small rituals of life are forever altered, the family meals take on a new meaning and a new pattern. Our minds become more pensive, more reflective, and less sure about everything we once knew. Loss creates a new person in us and the challenge for us who believe in God is to make this new person everything God created us to be. There is another option and that is to let grief consume us to the point that we disappear from the social stage, begin to harbor resentments, become angry overtime, and check-out mentally and spiritually. But those who believe in Christ do not lose their hope while they grieve. Our hope is full of immortality and we know that we will see our dearly departed again someday. This is Jesus' promise in the Gospel today.

Jesus says in John 6, "All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away." This is an incredible promise. Those who come to Christ will never be driven away, rejected, despised, or condemned. Jesus is not repelled by our sin, nor is he appalled by our lives. He welcomes us with open arms because he loves us in ways that confound the mind. Nothing in this verse tells anything about the quality of the life of those who first come to Jesus had. We know that once they come to Jesus their life is changed forever, but there are no preconditions to come to Jesus. The verse doesn't say, "Those super-good people who come to me. Those people who levitate between heaven and earth and come to me. Those who came to church seven days a week and come to me. Those who built hospitals and orphanages and come to me." All it says is "those given to me by my Father who come to me I will never drive away." The only action required is to come to him. I know Marilyn was one of Jesus' loved ones. Her family has told me so. She was a person of faith. She was a member of this church for many years. She was a redeemed sinner, and I had the honor of giving her Last Rites. There is no doubt she is one of the people about which Jesus is speaking today.

Jesus continues, "38 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me but raise them up at the last day." This is a profound and amazing statement. Jesus' mission on earth is to do the Father's will and this will is not to conquer nations, to topple tyrants, to end world poverty, or to rule the world. We know this will be his final mission at the end of days, but his first mission was

much simpler, and yet much more significant. The Father's will is that Jesus will not lose anyone or anything the Father has given him. In other words, his job is to save those his Father sent him to the world to save. Imagine what love God has for us that his Son's primary mission on earth is the salvation of sinners. And this is not just a gift for sinners in First Century Palestine, but this is a gift for sinners in every age, every generation, every gender, and every nationality. This is our God.

Jesus continues, "40 For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." This statement is radical in its generosity and love. It is not our performance or our merit that will lead us to resurrection. It is not the quality or prominence of our friends and benefactors. It is not the wealth we accumulate during our lifetime. It is not even the quality or frequency of religious practices and devotions. The only requirement is that we look at the Son of God and believe in him. It is ultimately about faith. Faith and faith alone. Faith in whom? Faith in the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth. That's it! Plain and simple, although not easy. Faith in Jesus has become almost controversial. The number of people in America who belong to a mainline church, whether Judaism, Christianity, or Islam has dropped to below 50%. This was the news of the Gallop poll published this week. People are walking away from God and people are walking away from Christianity. Those who remain are challenging the new status quo. We who believe have become radical Christians.

Let me tell you a story to illustrate what John is telling us today. There was a very wealthy man who had a terrible fight with his son, who was soon after drafted to go into Vietnam. The fight had to do with the young man chosen vocation. Whereas his father wanted him to be a banker like himself, the young man wanted to be a painter. Sadly, three years after joining the army, the son was killed in Vietnam. The guilt and anguish over his only son's death were devastating to the father. He became a recluse, resigned from all boards, and distanced from all friends and acquaintances. He had no other children and no living relatives, so he decided to lead a quiet life until God decided to take him. About two years after his son's death, the father heard a knock on his door. A weather-beaten soldier, wearing a cast over his right arm was at the door. He was the son's best friend in Vietnam who had just returned from war after an injury. He told the old man how his son had saved his life and the lives of several other men, choosing to die to save them. He also told him that several days before he was killed, Charlie had painted a small painting of himself smiling and the young soldier wanted the old man to have it.

The old man named the picture, "The Son." He loved the small, simple, beautiful painting of his son smiling and placed it close to him in his study until he died. When the old man died, he left a will directing his lawyers to place all his properties and possession on a silent auction. In a large hall pictures of all his belongings were placed around the walls by number. On a certain day, prospective bidders would have only 8 hours to bid whatever they wanted to pay for the properties. All bids were to be entered secretly in a

box located on a small table below the picture of the item: buildings, vehicles, planes, paintings, oriental rugs, jewelry, or piece of furniture. At the end of the day, the lawyers were to read the rest of the will out loud, which contained information about who got the cash and investments the old man held.

When the day of the auction came, the entire city was present at the building, the media was station inside and outside the building, wealthy people from around the world had their proxy's ready to compete for the expensive collection. At around five minutes before the auction was to close, a young man walked in, looked around the building for a few seconds, but then stopped in front of a picture called "The Son." There was something in the small picture that captivated him. He could not take his eyes off of the image of the smiling young man. No one else had been interested in the small picture, which had not received any bids all day. In a rush, the young man took one of the bidding forms and bid as much as he had, which was twenty dollars.

Once the auction was over, the lawyers read the rest of the will which said, "There is only one winner here today, gets everything. All buildings, vehicles, investments, and money." Then the lawyers read the last sentence in the will, "He who gets 'The Son' gets everything." This is what the Gospel of John is telling us today. He or she who gets God's Son gets everything.

I am here to tell you that Marilyn Nicholson got "God's Son" and today she gets a fortune worth much more than all the money in the world.

I hope today that you too will get God's Son. Only he makes the difference. He is the greatest treasure any of us could ever get. May he continue to bless you. Amen!