

“Lent: a Time to Assess Gains and Losses”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 8, 2009

Second Sunday in Lent

Psalm 16

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 8:31-38

There used to be a time when it was okay to say, “no pain, no gain.” We used to hear Arnold (Schwarzenegger) say it, back when he was the *Terminator* and before he became the *Governator*. But, in this particular season of Lent – in the midst of these particular circumstances – it may be easier for us to have compassion for those who have recently experienced losses: whether it be their jobs, or their homes, or their retirement accounts, or just a general sense of security. All too often, through no fault of their own, those around us and among us have seen gains turned into losses; all of which makes it hard to recognize the fairness or fullness of life.

At this turning point in Mark’s gospel, Jesus says not just to his disciples, but to the crowds as well; and not in the cryptic language of parables, but openly and truthfully – that his life’s direction would, from this point forward, be pointed toward the cross. He taught them that he would suffer, and be rejected, and die a gruesome death; but that his suffering would not be a loss, but a gain. Therefore, the way for followers of his to gain life was to follow him. God’s love would be revealed to them through a common experience of both pain and victory; loss and gain. What is forfeited through this life of following Jesus is not what we might expect: for it is not a loss of freedom, but a rejection of self-interest as life’s primary motivator. What is gained is the ability to love all others, which comes from having been loved: loved even to the point of bearing the burden of the cross.

Frederick Buechner writes: *The love for equals is a human thing ~ of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles."*

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing ~ the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing ~ to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich. The world is always bewildered by its saints.

And then there is love for the enemy ~ love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. This is God's love. It conquers the world.¹

In referencing the cross, Jesus could not have chosen a more vivid image. In first century Palestine, “the cross meant one thing: a cruel death that awaited anyone who dared to threaten Rome’s supremacy. Jesus’ hearers knew exactly what the cross meant. In 6 CE, two thousand Galilean rebels had been crucified. Imagine the impression this must have made on young Jesus

¹ As quoted by Winifred Collin in “Living, Loving and Giving”

and those who were with him that day.”² Back then, the cross meant death to your ambitions, dreams, security and entire future. Today, “bearing the cross” requires us to accept the paradox of the gospel: that in losing his life, Christ claimed victory for us; and that in losing our lives, we ultimately gain life back again, life in its fullness.

Sally and Bill thought they were done raising children: no more diapers, ear infections, toilet training, making school lunches. So, when their drug-addicted daughter lost custody of her one year-old son, they almost let him go to a foster family. They were too old, they thought, and they must have done something really wrong to have a daughter so misguided that social services would have to intervene in this way.

At the eleventh hour, they changed their mind and assumed legal custody of little Owen. He lived at their home and came to know his grandparents to be his immediate family. Over the years, they sacrificed much, but needed only to sneak into his room at night and watch him sleep peacefully to know what they were getting back in return.

Even in those areas of our lives where we take the most pride: whether as teachers or healers, as care-givers or even financial experts; we are so often confounded by our inability to carry the weight we think we should, or that others seem to think we can. Many times, the “cross” that we bear causes us to think about what might have been; about what would be an easier way; maybe even what ought to be only if...

But, to our worries and insecurities and wavering self-confidence, Jesus says “follow me.” We may have heard him say this to us before – like the disciples had when they first stepped out of their boats – but now – on this forty-day journey through Lent – we can hear it again in reference to the divine things and human things. “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.” (Mark 8:35)

Our freedom is not the mere capacity to act on every impulse, to scratch every available itch. That is not freedom; it is instead an enslavement to every whim, every new fad, to all the urges that can and do befall us. Freedom is the capacity to stand fast in one’s commitments, it is the capacity to act consistently with one’s true nature as God’s creature.

Jesus proves that perfect freedom can be shown in perfect obedience to God. In freedom, he chose the terrible necessity of the cross because the love of God required it. He, who was God, freely accepted as his own the burden of others. God’s very being demands that the sins of the guilty as well as the sufferings of the innocent be borne by God himself, for God is love.³ No price tag can be put on that type of freedom, it is the gift we are given by a loving God.

A reporter was visiting a hospital in India. As he looked around the room full of diseased and dying people, he caught sight of a nun who was attending to one of the patients. As the news man walked toward her, he was overcome by the foul odor coming from the man’s wounds, and when he looked at the area the woman was bandaging, it almost made him sick. “Sister,” he

² W. Hulitt Gloer in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2

³ Ronald Goetz, “The Freedom of Necessity”

said, “I wouldn’t do what you’re doing for a million dollars.” The nun glanced back toward the reporter and said, “neither would I.”⁴ Bearing our cross means doing those things that there isn’t enough money in the world to justify doing. But, we do them anyway, because that’s what God requires of those who follow Christ.

In the last section of his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis says this: “One principle runs through all life, from top to bottom, give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose life and it will be saved. Submit to death – even the death of ambitions and secret wishes. Keep nothing back. For, nothing in us that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for Christ,” Lewis writes, “and you will find him; and with him, everything else thrown in.”⁵

As long as the self rules in our lives, we will forever search for painless shortcuts in life. We will try again and again to substitute some other way for the way of the cross. But it is only when we deny ourselves and embrace the idea and reality of the cross that we can transform the loss of life into a gain. When we are finally ready to accept Jesus for who he is – the suffering one who willingly lays down his life for others – then we can understand who we are to be.

Following Jesus involves self-sacrifice of a special kind. For the key to finding oneself is losing oneself. Christ does not encourage us to sacrifice our honor for profit. He does not call us to exchange our principles to gain popularity. Jesus does not ask us to trade lasting things for easy success. He does not want us to sacrifice that which is eternal for comfort in the present day. No, our self-sacrifice, “denying ourselves,” only mirrors the cross-bearing Christ when we choose to hand our decisions, our protection, and our provision over to God.

Will you make that decision and embark on that journey to walk behind Christ on this and all of your days. Will you take up your cross and follow him, seeking to keep your mind on divine things and not just earthly things? Hear these words that Paul offers to the Ephesians:

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...Put away your former way of life, your old self, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds...and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Eph. 4:1-3, 22-24, 32)

AMEN.

⁴ C. Edward Bowen in *Lectionary Homiletics*, March 2003.

⁵ As quoted by Peter Marty, “Christ and Everything Else Thrown In”