



Transfiguration of the Lord

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Mark 8:31-38

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“Gain the World Losing?”

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.' The word of the Lord....

During the last two years, one of my personal tasks was to divest myself of a rather large professional library. Knowing that I would be semi-retiring soon, I realized that I could not be hauling a few thousand books around the country with me. Consequently I made the decision that over a period of two years, I would half my books twice, leaving me with about a ¼ of my library, (the “necessary” volumes needed for preaching). The task was not easy, but it was a very satisfying one, because I made sure that my library went to newly ordained pastors, (many who I ordained as the moderator of Philadelphia Presbytery). The remainder went to seminaries and libraries.

As I was sorting the books, I would go through them and read some of the notes that I made in the margins. Some of the books had papers and pieces of sermons folded into them. One book had a most intriguing paper folded into it. It was from the 4th or 5th year of my ministry. It was hand typed, (there were no word processors then). It was done for a young pastor’s workshop of some type.

The paper contained a list of accomplishments that I hoped into attain in my future ministry. As I mentioned it was almost thirty five years old. At the time, I was newly married and our daughter was not on the scene. The list contained professional as well as personal accomplishments that I was hoping to realize during my career. I listed types of churches I

wanted to serve. I described the home that I wanted to live in with my wife. I wrote about the type of dog I wanted. I even mentioned the car I thought I should drive. But most of it was professional, focusing on accomplishments that I hoped for in my career as a pastor. It was interesting to read the list 30 plus years after the fact. Why?

Because as I went down the list, I realized I had accomplished most of those things. One would think that there would be a great sense of satisfaction from reading my list, but there wasn't. Instead, there was a kind of inner pathos that came over me. The list seemed so meaningless and superficial as I held it. In the twilight of my career it occurred to me that yes, I had a pretty good resume.... But a verse from scripture haunted me as I held that paper. "For what will it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?"

This was not a harsh self-judgment, but rather a realization that all those things that I thought were so important; those accomplishments into which I put a great deal of time, energy, sweat and tears; all those things were ultimately not that important. A lot of luck and a bit of hard work had given me a wonderful career. I had indeed "gained the world" that I wanted. But was that the most important thing?

One of the messages of the Bible, indeed of Jesus, is that we often spend our lives, our time and our energy devoted to things that ultimately do not matter. It is an equal opportunity sin, and even clergy are seduced by it. In the words of Jesus to Peter, "we tend to set our minds on human things and not God."

It is also a temptation for churches too. We speak about "effective churches" and we tend to measure them by the programs, the attendance, the buildings, and the reputation that congregations enjoy. Congregations, too, seek to gain the whole world... wanting respect, honor, and presence in a community.

This phenomena is not without irony. A few years ago, I read about a congregation that decided to remove the cross from its sanctuary and its buildings. Why? The minister explained that it was a "turnoff". From focus groups he discovered that people did not want to hear about sacrifice and crosses and he saw the cross as an impediment to church growth. Ironically, they put a large globe, the world, where the cross once stood.

(http://www.mlive.com/news/muskegon/index.ssf/2010/06/spring_lakes_christ_community.html)

"What profits a church to gain the whole world, and lose its soul."

The soul of a congregation, indeed the soul of the individual Christian is the cross. We are in the business of "soul-making" not church development. How do we gain our soul in a world that glorifies that which is ultimately empty and meaningless? We gain our soul by taking up the cross! That is the message of Jesus, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." We are not about winning and accomplishing. We are all about losing.... Losing our lives and gaining our souls.

How do we find our own cross? How do we carry it and follow Christ? Congregations I have served have taught me a great deal about this. I am reminded of a woman who at one time had the world by the tail.... Her husband owned a high tech manufacturing company. They lived in a spacious home in the right part of the community. They had everything one could want in life...

and then lost it all. The high tech bubble burst, and her husband embezzled funds to keep his company going. He ended up in federal prison. They lost their home, and she had to move to an apartment with her children and went back to work as a nurse. At that time our congregation was involved with a health care facility in Guatemala. This woman went on one of our work trips there, serving as a health care screener with some of the physicians from our congregation. Something happened on that trip and she went back again on her own, at her own expense, (which she really did not have.) She went back again, and again. 2 and 3 times a year. In an email to me she remarked, "I have never been happier. I have found peace."

She lost the world... and yet by giving of herself... she gained her soul. She discovered her cross, and the peace of Christ which passes all understanding.

What is your cross? What is the cross that Christ is calling you to take up? Christ is concerned about your soul and mine... and so he calls us to a life of sacrifice. A life where we give all... and paradoxically discover more. Christ is calling Poland Presbyterian Church to discover its true cross... The soul of this congregation is found, not in its numbers, its wealth, its beautiful building, nor its influence. No. It is found in its willingness to sacrifice, to help, to minister to others in the name of Christ.

On the day when I was going through my books, sorting and reminiscing, I came across another book with something that I tucked inside of it. It was a card with a letter. It was a card that a member sent to me following my departure from my first congregation. The letter recalled an evening when I came to the house of the family.

I was right out of seminary, 25 years old, and serving as an associate pastor. It was a Sunday evening and I was with the youth group when I received a call that an elderly woman in the congregation died. I went to the home to be with the family. This was my first encounter with grief. The body was still there. The family was sitting around the table, hurt, bewildered, in sorrow and pain. I joined them at the table... and just sat there. I was hoping for the right words to say... but they didn't come. And so I sat there in silence for what seemed to be hours. I concluded my visit there with a mumbled prayer, and departed feeling like I had done nothing.. and perhaps this was not my calling.

The thank you note in the good bye card recalled that evening with the family, and the daughter wrote, how important and meaningful my presence was that night. Honest to goodness, I cried when I got the card... and cried again when I read it. Because that is what the cross is all about. It is about giving when you feel you have nothing to give. It is about being with those who are in pain, and feeling the pain and shortcomings of your own humanity. It is about silence... being still when you have nothing to say... and when nothing needs to be said because "the comforter" the spirit Christ promised is present.

I have a nice resume. I accomplished what I wanted in ministry, but in the words of Paul, "All these things are loss." But my soul grew in moments like that evening when I entered into the pain of others... It grew when I struggled not knowing the answers nor what to say. It grew in the silence that allowed the spirit to speak.

The good news that Jesus proclaims is that those moments, those times when we are intimate with the cross are the moments when we are closest to him: to God. They are the times when

our souls are formed and re-formed. They are times when we experience eternity, but for a moment... Times when the paradox of losing life and gaining it make sense and become the foundation of wisdom. It is the wisdom of the cross. It is the Good News. Amen.

2nd service: Introduce Hymn 223: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

Word about Isaac Watts: "Christianized Psalms"

Unique nature of this hymn.... Description of the cross.... And its theological meaning... In the 1st person. The last verse speaks of the response to the cross... picking up on the theme of my message.... "were the whole realm of nature mine....."