

February 26, 2023

Reframe: What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul?

Mark 8:34-37

Jeff Marian

Scholar and theologian Thomas Merton once said, "People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall." Those are some seriously convicting words! As we begin our Lenten journey, we're going to hear Jesus raise a similar issue, but before I read today's text let me set the context.

Jesus and his disciples had been together for nearly three years. During that time the disciples had heard Jesus teach with profound wisdom. They had seen him do miraculous things. And no doubt, as time went on they began to wonder if Jesus was the messiah. That all came to a head when Peter, always the first one to speak, was the first to say a loud, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

We don't know what images were dancing through the disciples' minds in that moment, but I'm guessing that it wasn't sugar plums. It was most likely visions of power and wealth. The disciples expected that the Messiah would drive the Romans out of Israel and reestablish the independent glory of their nation's past. And if Jesus was the Messiah, then they were sure to be a part of his inner circle of advisors. We're talking cabinet positions with all the power and prestige and possessions that went with it.

So, imagine their shock when Jesus tried to reframe their expectations. According to Jesus, the Messiah would not reign with military might. He would not usher in a time of national glory and prosperity. He would be betrayed, arrested, beaten, mocked and crucified. And if these disciples wanted to follow him, they must also take up their cross and follow him. When Peter tried to tell Jesus that he was mistaken, Jesus sharply rebuked him and then addresses both the disciples and the crowds. And today's lesson captures his words to them,

Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and

follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?

This is the word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

I generally try to stay away from binary, either/or thinking, but Jesus' words draw a sharp line between two options: hang onto your life, gain the whole world and ultimately lose your life OR give up your own way, take up your cross and save your life. Clear as mud, right? Let me try to unpack it a bit.

First, let's understand what Jesus means by "life". He's not talking about our physical life...our breathing and beating heart. The Greek word Jesus uses here refers to the very center of our being. He's talking about the quality of one's existence. When Jesus said that he came to bring us abundant life he wasn't talking about more days breathing; he was talking about making our lived experience infinitely richer. That's what's at stake here. How do we live a life of deep meaning, a life that deeply satisfies?

The disciples seemed to believe, as we so often do, that the way to experience the richness of life is by taking the pathway to power and possessions, free to do whatever we please. But Jesus says that's a lie. Lean the ladder of your life against that wall and you will lose the kind of life that Jesus promises, the kind of life we all long for.

So, Jesus offers a different wall to lean the ladder of our lives against. It's the wall of giving up our own way and taking up the cross. Now, let's be clear about what that means. Taking up the cross means being willing to suffer the consequences of following the way of Jesus faithfully, whatever those consequences might be. It means putting Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort or security. It means working for justice rather than demanding our rights. Working for peace rather than insisting on our own way. Forgiving instead of retaliating. Tending to the poor rather than tending to our wealth.

And all of that sounded absurd to those early disciples, just as it sounds absurd to most of us today. Until...

Until your life, your breathing, beating heart life, is nearing the end. And suddenly it becomes painfully clear what makes life rich and meaningful and abundant. And it isn't all the things that this world promises. It isn't power and prestige and possessions. It is exactly what Jesus said it was: loving God and loving our neighbor with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength. Investing into a relationship with the One with whom we will spend eternity and knowing that we have been enriched by enriching the lives of others.

Jesus once taught this wisdom in a story about a farmer whose crops were so abundant that he built bigger barns and said to himself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'

Jesus concluded that little lesson with these words, "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

The book of Proverbs seeks to teach us the same lesson with these powerful words, "Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may grow in wisdom."

How might your life and my life be different if we started everyday by asking ourselves, "If today is the last day of my life, how will I invest it? Against what will I lean the ladder of my life?"

I'm so grateful that years ago, someone let me know that my ladder was leaning up against the wrong wall. My fall could have been painful! But I'm even more grateful that Jesus calls us to consider what ladder our lives are leaning against. In this Lenten season, I want to challenge you to slow down and ask the Spirit to help you to see yourself and your life more clearly. To come to terms with those aspects of your thoughts, actions and decisions that are out of alignment with the way of Jesus. Prayerfully and honestly ask yourself, "What wall am I leaning the ladder of my life against?" In what ways am I seeking my sense of identity, purpose, meaning or security from things

that are fleeting, that ultimately will not satisfy? Things that, as life comes to a close, will not fill me with a sense of peace? And whatever the Spirit reveals, confess it, knowing that you've been forgiven, and ask the Spirit to guide you in whatever may need to change in your life. Today, I want you to hear Jesus saying to you, "Find your identity and your sense of purpose and meaning in me. In me you will find all that your heart most desires. Life and more life. Lean your life against me and you'll find you no longer need a ladder at all."

Let's pray... Lord Jesus, thank you for asking the challenging questions that provoke us to think more deeply about life. We find it so easy to live on autopilot, taking the path of least resistance, only to discover how often that path leads us to place we don't want to be. Grant us grace to repent, to reframe and rethink what wall we are leaning the ladder of our life against. And assure us that even when the walls we choose collapse, you are always there to pick us up and start again. We pray all this in your strong name. Amen.