

## **“A Question from Jesus: About the Meaning of Life”**

Rev. Stephen Michie     Huguenot Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Pelham Manor, NY     March 16, 2014

**Isaiah 45:18-25**

**Luke 9:23-27**

Text: “*What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?*” Luke 9:25

I wonder if it is clear to you why the Church lays such stress on the observance of Lent? Is it merely for the sake of tradition? Is there some thought that we need to have our noses rubbed in our faults and failures? Are we trying to store up enough guilt to last us all year? To paraphrase the late Dr. William Sloane Coffin, “Popular Christianity, as measured by church attendance, can pass quickly from the poinsettias of Christmas, to the palms of Palm Sunday, to the lilies of Easter, conveniently bypassing the crown of thorns of the Passion.” But he then adds, “That is wrong – not only theologically but in terms of our experience. The Cross is central and crucial to our faith.” In other words, if our Christian practice is not to be soft, superficial, or sentimental, then somewhere in these days of Lent we had better join Jesus on his way to Calvary.

Today we encounter a question that is meant not so much to be answered as it is meant simply to be lived with. At least that’s the kind of question I think it is: “*What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?*” Matthew, Mark and Luke all report Jesus asking this question. They also are in agreement about when, and where, he asked it. His ministry was heading toward its climax. As the opposition to Jesus began to build, he was telling his disciples that he “*must suffer many things.*” He also told them that a price would have to be paid by any who chose to follow his way. So Jesus used the strongest image he could think of: “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily, and follow me.*”

Jesus went on to speak about a paradox which is central to the Christian way of life. It is when we learn to give ourselves away that we discover one of the greatest joys in life. It is not in self-promotion, but in self-expenditure, that life’s true meaning can be made glorious. The way Jesus put it was: “*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.*” Such was the nature of the conversation which Jesus was having with his followers when he asked what advantage it is to gain the whole world, if – in so doing – it means the loss of one’s self.

In the King James Version of the Bible, it is said that what we are in danger of losing is our “*soul.*” But in our contemporary New English Bible, it is one’s “*true self*” that is said to be at risk – and that probably is the best translation. The “*true self*” does not mean some separate compartment of life, where our religious thoughts and aspirations are lodged. Those who rendered this New English Bible version understood that Jesus was never one to disentangle faith from ordinary, everyday life. And in this question, what he is concerned about is not some “*spiritual part*” of life, detached from the rest of it, but rather the whole person, the essential you, your whole being – in all its height and depth of mystery.

This question has not seemed very important in recent years. In fact, in the minds of many it has seemed totally irrelevant. On the whole, we’ve been preoccupied with other things. To some sociologists, what we’ve been obsessed with in this generation is purely and simply self-indulgence, fueled by conspicuous consumption. And it’s not been only the “*One-Percenters*” who are being thought of here. Many people have been concerned to “*get to the well before it runs dry*” – working even longer hours than usual, taking bigger risks with investments, etc. There seems to have been little or no concern that such single-minded pursuit of this goal might jeopardize one’s “*soul*” – one’s “*true self.*”

In such a context, should we be surprised that some “chickens have come home to roost”? Should we be surprised at a recent report suggesting that the top three goals of college freshmen are: first, money; second, power; and third, reputation – and that cheating among college students is at the highest level ever? Should we be surprised that current election campaigns, like the one that will occur this autumn, have become costlier and meaner than ever? If winning is what counts, ultimately – gaining “*the whole world*” – why should we be surprised?

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One can argue that there’s nothing new going on here. The human race is basically the same as always – after all, Cain and Abel were at each other’s throats a long time ago, and the great patriarch Jacob was as “slick” as any of today’s wheeler-dealers in looking out for #1. If we are no better, we are probably no worse than our ancestors. But what has been different about our recent history is a widespread cynicism about life’s meaning and purpose. Especially in the Developed World, this skepticism about human dignity and destiny has led to a secularism that views only the here-and-now as important, and that virtually denies any spiritual grandeur to human beings.

Elsewhere, you may remember, there was something called Marxism which was to be the wave of the future. Among its basic tenets was the belief that “religion is an opiate of the people” – something to keep the proletariat in its place. Religion was not viewed as something to lift human beings of any and every station to a higher way of life. Indeed, the contention was that there is no God, and therefore no need to be concerned about the loss of the “soul.” But strange things have already happened, and not only the collapse of Marxism but also the resurgence of religious practices in the former Soviet Union, as also its Iron Curtain satellite nations. There are “stirrings of the Spirit” elsewhere: across central and southern Africa, along with much of Latin America, where the Christian faith is growing faster than anywhere – at nearly historic rates.

In our own nation, while it is not yet a ground swell, there are signs that many among us are on a “spiritual quest,” driven by a “soul hunger” – probably as a reaction to the highly materialistic preoccupations of the last generation or so. It must be noted that while cheating may be rising on college campuses, religion courses now are extremely popular. A newspaper article I’ve saved on this subject from a Los Angeles Times reporter is titled “Studying Religion.”

“Across the United States,” she writes, “scholars have begun to promote a new paradigm in academia: religion matters. Once a largely-forgotten factor in social research, dismissed by those who believed that society would inevitably secularize and cast spirituality aside, religion now is a hot field of inquiry. No longer confined to theological seminaries,” says the author, “religion is being increasingly probed in departments of sociology, political science, and international relations, and even in business schools. So it shouldn’t be surprising to learn that the most highly-subscribed college lecture available on-line is on Ethics & Morals.”

As I listen, I hear people asking about life’s meaning and purpose: “If gaining the whole world is what it’s all about, how come I don’t feel better?” is a typical question. I hear thoughtful men and women wondering out loud about the direction in which our society is headed – whether, indeed, there is a direction, a worthy and compelling vision. There seems to be a growing awareness that we are living in momentous times, when the world could take a turn not only toward peace and justice, but toward a renewal of the human spirit. If you have doubts about this, think of the “Arab Spring” – or very recently the uprising against Soviet-style repressive rule in places like Ukraine. All of which is to suggest that we may again be ready to hear the question of Jesus, and not brush it aside as irrelevant: “*What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?*”

The answer is self-evident: there is very little profit – none, in fact, if your bank account is full and yet your spirit is empty. That’s the obvious point of Jesus’ parable of the Rich Fool, which we examined two Sundays ago. We know the answer! It’s why I began this sermon by saying that it’s the question itself that we are meant to ponder, and wrestle with, each one of us. But if we are to do that well, we need to make sure we know at what the question is aimed.

Behind the question – “*What if we lose or forfeit our true selves...?*” – is the assumption that we have a choice. We have a choice – and it is fundamentally between a life that acknowledges the God who made us and on whom we are dependent, and a life that considers itself self-made and autonomous. The choice, in so many words, is between a life of loyalty to God, and one of “idolatry.” Earlier we heard Isaiah ridicule the “*wooden idols which cannot save.*” This struggle still goes on – between the living and true God, and all other false gods. The names may have changed, but their substance remains the same. They are the things that pretend to save, to give meaning and even glory to life, but which cannot. They are the things that separate us, not only from the true God but from our true selves.

How can you and I know what particular idols are seeking to displace God in our hearts? One way to find out, says the Jesuit theologian Walter Burghardt, is to take a personal inventory. Ask yourself: “What claims top priority in my case? What is #1 on my personal ‘most wanted list’...not as abstract principle, but in day-to-day practice – that is, in the way I live? Who or what rules my life? If,” says Burghardt, “it is not in some way the God who made me, the God for whom I am made, then I am in desperate straits – and I had better get my Christian act together.”

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“*What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?*” This choice that we have is ours to make, and nobody else’s! But we need to realize that we never make that choice once and for all – we never are done with this question of Jesus. If only it were that easy! If only you could answer it and be finished with it – when you leave school to enter a career, say; or when you bring your first child into the world; or when you decide to profess your faith in Christ and join the church. How nice if you could choose, then, to hold on to your “true self” – and the decision would be made forever.

But that is not how it works. We encounter this question of Jesus over and over again – for as long as we live, from childhood to old age, as we confront what someone has called “the maze of daily decisions” – personal, interpersonal, vocational, economic, and political. The poet warns us that it is easy to be losing one’s true self, and not even realize it. For,

Life is not lost by dying! Life is lost  
Minute by minute, day by dragging day,  
In all the thousand small, un-daring ways...

In all likelihood, that is how most of us do lose our “true selves,” if we do – and that is why you and I so desperately need the Church. It’s why we need to come here to worship, because this really is the only place, the only community which won’t let you forget what the primary question is. This is the one place that will keep pointing you to Christ, who not only asks the question, but who shows us the way to “live that question.” It is Christ who gives us the grace to keep, and not to lose – to hold on to, and not give away – the “true selves” we have been given by God.

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The great preacher Carlyle Marney once told a story about exactly this theological orientation to living. He was the pastor of a large Baptist church in Charlotte, N.C. One of his parishioners, because of “shrewd manipulation from outside,” one day lost his lifetime business – and many millions of dollars in the process. Marney told of visiting this man the day it happened to see what help, if any, he might offer.

He found his friend “sitting in his pajamas on his bed, eating a ripe banana, smoking his favorite pipe, and reading the New Testament.” When Marney asked his friend what part he was reading, the man responded, “Something about ‘gaining the whole world but losing yourself...’” Marney said, “I just offered a brief prayer and then went on home.”

And why not? For while his parishioner may have “lost the whole world,” his “true self” – his “soul” – seemed altogether safe. And I wonder: would it be the same for you and me?