

September 3, 2023 - Matthew 16:21-28

I've told the story of how I ended up in the ministry several times to many people in this congregation. I might have even mentioned it in a sermon before. I don't remember. But I suppose it might be worth repeating. Because it relates to our Gospel lesson today.

I was a college student in my third year. I had already switched majors once, rather drastically, going from a Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry to a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature. And I was much, much happier as an English major.

But there was still something missing. Particularly when I started talking to my professors about my future. Because they all said I was a good enough writer and literary critic to go to grad school. Get my PhD and become a professor like them. Teaching Shakespeare and Chaucer to another generation of undergraduates.

It was tempting. I was good at it. I enjoyed it. It came easy to me. But I couldn't see myself doing it for the rest of my life. Because, to be honest, it just felt so... pointless. And I say that as someone who loves Shakespeare and Chaucer. Who loves reading and contemplating what I read and writing about what I've read. But I just couldn't see the point in it.

Ultimately, I concluded there was only one book worth spending my life reading over and over again. There was only one book worth analyzing and writing about at length. There was only one book worth spending my life teaching to others. And that was God's Word. So here I am.

As I said, I was reminded of this fact as I read our Gospel lesson today. Because this whole text really boils down to that same question: What's the point? What's our goal here? What are we spending our lives doing? And is it something worthwhile?

It starts asking that question from the very beginning, in that first section with Peter's confrontation with Jesus. If you recall our Gospel lesson last week, Peter has just had a bit of a breakthrough. The disciples are not known for being tremendously insightful. So when Jesus asks Peter, "*Who do you say that I am,*" and Peter replies, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,*" this is big.

Jesus himself tells Peter that this is an insight revealed to him not by his own flesh and blood, but by his Father in heaven. As if to say, "Peter, you are not smart enough to have come up with that on your own. Because what you've said is absolutely true. In fact, it's the rock upon which the whole Church is built."

So the disciples know who Jesus is. But what they don't understand quite yet is why he's there. And when Jesus explains that part to them, Peter's newfound insight crumbles. Because Jesus tells him that he is here, on this earth, to die. That's his mission. He was born to be crucified and die and be buried and then on the third day rise from the dead.

And Peter won't accept it. He refuses to believe that the Christ, the Son of the Living God, has gathered Peter and his fellow disciples together just to watch their Lord be executed by a bunch of corrupt Jewish leaders and pagan Roman soldiers. That is a pointless death, in Peter's mind. That is a pointless ministry. That is a pointless reason to live.

Peter's mind is set on the things of man, not the things of God. And it's an easy mindset to get into, especially today. Because our culture very much revolves around extending your life as much as you possibly can.

We're obsessed with it. Warning labels on every product we buy. Medicine to treat every condition we could possibly have. Billions upon billions of dollars in research to find a cure for every disease and ailment.

Now, I'm not saying that medical science is bad or evil. Medicine is wonderful thing. Giving life to people who would have otherwise died is a true blessing from God. These are good things. That's not my point.

My point is that we do have a tendency to idolize them. To turn them into gods. To do everything we can to squeeze out just one more day from this earthly existence. And to live in fear - to live in near paranoia - of all the things that can kill our bodies.

So we go to doctor after doctor. We take prescription after prescription. We chase after health fad after health fad. All for... what? What's the point? So that we can get an extra day? An extra month? An extra year? What have you gained by it all?

Which is the same thing that Jesus asks Peter. Peter doesn't want Jesus to die. He believes being crucified by the Jews and Romans would be a pointless death.

But then Jesus turns this around on Peter. He tells him the opposite. To avoid death would be a pointless life.

Every one of us will die, after all. You can sometimes delay it, but you can't avoid it. And every day we are faced with the same questions. What are you living for? What are you dying for? You cling to this life with doctors and medicine and healthy living. But what are you doing with it? One day you will die. In the grand scheme of eternity, what will you have accomplished? You've kept your body alive, but what have you done with your soul and the souls of those around you. What's the point?

Sometimes, the point is to die. That's what Jesus explains to his disciples. The point of his life was to go to the cross and die. Die for you. Die to forgive your sins. Die to make you God's child. And that made his 33 years of life worth more than all the lifetimes of every other person that has ever and will ever live on this earth. By dying, he gave us life. Spiritual life. Eternal life, with him.

And so he asks us to look at our lives the same way. Take up your cross and follow him. Live your life knowing that what he asks you to do may not be good for your health. Being a Christian comes with a warning label.

Whoever would save his life will lose it. Clinging to your mortal life, to earthly things, to the things of man, is a guaranteed way to live a pointless life. A life in which you might live for a really long time, but in the end gain very little of eternal value.

But whoever loses their life for the sake of Christ will find it. They will find a life of eternal value, doing things that matter, for a God who loves them and gave his life for them. And gives to them eternal life.

Because, in the end, what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? What is there in this world that is a fair trade for immortality? Is there anything - any object, any achievement, any number of days tacked onto this mortal existence - that could be worth seeing Christ return with his angels to bring resurrection and paradise to all creation, but then have him turn to you and say, "Oh no, this isn't for you. You already had your life. It's over now."

20 years ago, I asked myself, "What's the point?" And I found that there was only one thing worth doing and I might just have the skills to do it. Not all of you have those skills. Not all of you have that calling. And that's OK.

It's not about skills or calling. It's about priorities. It's about discipleship. It's about taking up our cross everyday. Following our Lord everyday. Keeping him in front of us and the devil behind us everyday.

Knowing that the path we walk doesn't lead to the things of man, but to the things of God. Knowing that the path we walk doesn't lead to mortal life, but to immortal life. Knowing that the path we walk leads to a cross, but also to an empty tomb. For our Lord has already walked this path and has given his life for us. Amen.