

Matthew 16:21-28
August 31, 2008

South Plains
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Value of a Life

Jesus asks us, “What will it profit you if you gain the whole world but forfeit your life? Or what will you give in return for your life?” His question set me thinking about what gives a life value, anyway. In business and government, we do something called a “cost-benefit analysis” as a tool for determining whether a project is worth doing. When you do a cost-benefit analysis where the benefit is saving lives, it turns out that you have to assign a dollar value to one life. The Environment Protection Agency calculates that one American life is worth \$6.9 million.

That sounds crass, but I suppose it’s useful. Surely, that’s not what Jesus really meant by wondering, “What will they give in return for their life?” If Jesus was talking about intangible values that can’t be measured in dollars, and I’m convinced that is his meaning, then we still have to ask ourselves, “What gives my life value? What makes living worthwhile?” Or, to put the matter more bluntly, *What is so valuable to me that I am willing to subordinate everything else in order to realize that value, even if I have to give up life itself?*

That’s what is at stake in this confrontation between Peter and Jesus. That’s the measure of the commitment God has required of Jesus, and that is the

intangible factor in the commitment God asks of Jesus’ followers. Few of us may be called to die for the sake of the gospel. But, none of us can escape the value that Jesus Christ places on our commitment.

Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it (Matt 13:45-46).” What’s the pearl you and I are looking for?

All the talk about buying and selling, even when it’s metaphorical, seems too abstract. So, I’ve tried to imagine what the conversation between Jesus and Peter might have sounded like in an extended argument.

To set the stage, remember that Peter is feeling pretty good about himself. He has just blurted out to his leader, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And, Jesus not only gives that answer a thumbs up, he goes on to tell Peter that his confession is the rock foundation of the church.

There’s a long pause for the importance of Peter’s words to sink in with the other disciples. Jesus continues, “I must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

“God forbid it,” replies Peter. “We can’t let this happen to you. Your insight into scripture is finally

beginning to take hold in the mind of the people. Pretty soon we'll have enough followers to force real change in the synagogue, maybe even in the Temple itself. You can't talk about dying when you're so close to success."

"Peter, you don't understand. This is not what I want. Didn't you hear me say, 'I must go to Jerusalem,' even if it means I will be killed. It's what God wants."

But, Peter won't be put off by God-talk. "Look, Lord. If you are the Messiah, and I believe you are, there's absolutely nothing in scripture and nothing in the rabbi's commentaries on scripture to even suggest that the Messiah must suffer and die."

"Out of my way, you devil! If you want to have anything more to do with me, get behind me! If you want to support what I'm about, follow me! In fact, you may have to pick up your own cross. Rome will make room for one more. Look at yourself. In the space of five minutes, you've gone from a foundation rock to a rock in the road, a rock to stumble over."

Peter can't believe what he's hearing. "No, Lord. Your life is more valuable as an inspiring preacher, a healer, a friend to sinners, a teacher of scripture. We'll help you. We'll defend you.... Let the elders and the chief priests and the scribes do their worst. Even if it means they kill me, you must finish the work of the Messiah and bring in the kingdom."

"Peter, Peter. All this time together, and you have not understood. I must go to Jerusalem. If you want to follow me, put aside all your ambitions for the kingdom. The kingdom of heaven will come in God's own time and in God's own way. My job is to proclaim the good news that the kingdom is near. Repent and get ready. My life is not worth living unless I stick to that gospel."

"Then what should I do, Lord? What's our part in God's plan?"

That's the question for us today. What is our part in Jesus' mission? Given the history of Jesus ministry, his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave, for those of us who find value in his story, how are we to live? What is there about his life that can give our lives value and meaning?

I think we have two clues in this confrontation between Jesus and Peter. Most of us are like Peter. We want something to do as followers of Jesus that will be worthwhile. We don't want to come to worship that is mindless repetition. Projects without a purpose are neither service nor mission. Sunday School that fails to stimulate faith is aimless, learning. We are looking for fellowship that will at least make us feel better about being alive, Christian education that educates for mission, and worship that has the power to shape our souls.

The first clue that Jesus offers to Peter and us is the little saying, “Let them deny themselves (16:24).” Life is about choices and choices demand that we set priorities. Every week I make a to-do list of things I need to accomplish. At the end of most weeks, some items are left undone. A good week is when the most important items have been checked off the list, and what remains are low priority chores, things nice but not necessary. Jesus wants Peter and all his disciples to put make living in the kingdom of God at the top of our to-do list.

It does not mean living in a monastery for most of us, although it will require giving up something. And, it surely does not mean the sort of self-effacement that makes us a doormat. In fact living in the kingdom of God will identify us as the much-loved children of God. Like all children, we won’t get everything we want. We will subordinate our desires, and often our immediate comforts to the way God in Christ wants us to act and speak. And, the result makes us heirs of the kingdom.

When Moses stood before the Lord at the burning bush and God commissioned him to bring Israel out of Egypt, Moses knew it wasn’t going to be easy. That’s what his questions and humility are finally about. Being a leader means first and foremost following a dream that denies lesser desires, lesser wants, lesser goals.

That brings us to the second clue. Jesus tells Peter, “You are setting your mind not on divine things but

on human things.” Someone pointed out that human beings are different from most animals because animals keep their heads down, looking at the ground while we are looking into the distance. We will never understand Jesus if our top priority is self-preservation. Jesus knew that some things were worth his life.

Telling the truth about the kingdom was more important than pleasing the elders and chief priests. Healing the sick was worth breaking Sabbath regulations, even if it got him in trouble. The nearness of God’s kingdom made the threats of the Roman Empire and even the authority of Pilate of no account. The value of Jesus’ life was not how long he could live, but how well.

That is measure of the value of our lives also: how well we live. When John McCain was a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, he was regularly beaten and tortured. Many prisoners did not survive. Eventually, the North Vietnamese offered him his freedom. But, the price was not worth it; and he chose to remain in the Hanoi Hilton, as the POW’s called their massive prison. And, it’s not just famous leaders who make sacrifices. I’m thinking of a husband who remains married to his wife despite her mental illness that has separated them from friends. Or, the thousands of reservists who have gone to Iraq and Afghanistan in order to keep a promise.

These clues – denying ourselves and setting our mind on divine things – both point to a reality Jesus mentions to his disciples, a reality larger than they could

understand at the time. After predicting that he will be killed, Jesus adds, "And on the third day he will be raised." His resurrection gives his life meaning that surpasses all the good he did in preaching and teaching and healing, as important as that ministry was. His resurrection confirms that the kingdom is indeed very near. His resurrection is the first fruits of that kingdom, the down payment on eternal life. His resurrection means that we also will live.

Georgia Grissinger was not beloved by South Plains only because she was the oldest member at 98 years old. Those who have been around this church for a while know the stories about her stubborn support for a worshiping community on this corner. I have talked to people who remember Georgia picking them up along these roads and taking them to Sunday School because she believed children needed to know about Jesus. She attended Presbytery meetings as our elder commissioner when there was no pastor because she believed the church was larger than one congregation. She watched over this cemetery, keeping track of burials and monuments, because she believed remembering past saints gave strength to present saints. She kept South Plains alive when others might have given up.

The result of her effort is visible today in the vitality of this congregation and in the unseen lives of many people scattered far from Keswick. The worship service that celebrated her life last Friday was a witness to the resurrection, an affirmation that divine things outlast human things.

"Those who want to save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

The value of a life, the value of your life and mine is what we are willing to give our energies, our time and our commitment to doing.