

“What Does it Profit?”

Salado UMC—Preaching Text: Mark 8:31-38

Second Sunday in Lent: 28 February 2021

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“Good sense about trivialities is better than nonsense about things that matter”

Max Beerbohm—(1872 - 1956).

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Have you ever noticed how far our world will go to escape the realities and difficulties that life has thrust upon us? Here is a 20+ year old news item to ponder:

Among tourist-attraction theme parks recently proposed: one modeled after the Berlin Wall (armed guards, re-enacted escape attempts) in Ft. Lauderdale; an amusement park at the \$5 billion, never-used Kalkar, Germany, nuclear power plant (with the cooling towers holding up the roller coaster); the Navy Glory Center tribute to the Cold War in Vladivostok, Russia (charging visitors \$700 to fire a Soviet missile); and the Billie Sol Estes Museum in Granbury, Texas, featuring papers and artifacts of the notorious fertilizer-tank swindler of the 1960s (*Sun Times of Canada*, Dec 95; *Albuquerque Journal*, 11-4-95; *Globe & Mail*, 12-19-95; *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram*, Sept 95).

What would motivate people to establish these kinds of amusement parks? What kind of people would visit them for money? Apparently, many folks from both rich and poor countries would. If this is not a sign of a world gone a little daft then what is? Perhaps, God knew we needed something deeper and more significant in our lives. When do you think we'll get the message?

Mark's Gospel today is a judgment on the trifles we have contrived to keep us from facing the gravity of life's truth. It seems like we keep inventing ways to avoid our responsibility in caring for God's garden that we call our earthly home.

Charles Clayton Morrison (American Disciples of Christ minister) employs an effective image in describing the degree of our control of life. He says people are like passengers on a ship. Individuals exercise a good deal of freedom on board the ship. We decide to eat or not

to eat, to play or not to play, to sit on the deck or stay in the lounge. We may read or gamble during the days and the nights. But so far as the ship itself is concerned, we cannot decide which way it will go or how fast it will go or just when it will arrive at its destination. We can think of our freedom as within the ship's limitations. Many things will happen to us which we did not ask for and for which we really do not like (Gerald Kennedy, *The Lion and the Lamb*, Abingdon Press, 1950).

Speaking of the analogy of life and ships, Clovis Chappell tells of a Lee Line boat carrying a cargo of meat from New Orleans to Memphis. Another boat tried to pass it and the race was on. The Lee Line captain ordered full steam ahead but it was not enough to pass the other boat, so he ordered some of the fat meat thrown into the fire. This worked so well that he repeated it again and again. At last, with the whistle blowing and flag flying, the boat arrived at Memphis ahead of its rival. But when merchants came for their meat cargo, they discovered the meat had burned up during the race. It is tempting to lose sight of the voyage's purpose, so that, at the end, the essential is missing (Gerald Kennedy, *The Parables*, Harper & Row, 1960).

Our Bible lesson today is the pivot point in Mark's gospel story. Peter has just declared to Jesus that, "You are the Messiah. And he [Jesus] sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him" (Mark 8:29-30). Is Peter's confession suppressed because it is correct, or because it is incorrect or possibly made under false preconceptions? Mark by using the theme of the "messianic secret" entices the reader on. Hear what Mark tells his readers:

[31] 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. [32] He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. [33] But 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. [35] For 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. [36] For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? [37] Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? [38] Those 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” (Mark 8:31-38).

To answer our earlier question, “Is Peter’s confession to be suppressed because it is correct, or because it is incorrect or possibly made under false preconceptions?” The answer may be a combination of the two. Peter may have given a correct answer, but there was more to it. From Jesus’ negative reaction to Peter’s rebuke of him, Peter may have given a correct answer, but with wrong reasoning. It is for this principle that Jesus has bluntly expressed what being the Messiah is all about. In point of fact, Jesus tells his disciples, not once, but three times (see also: Mark 9:32-34; 10:33-35) what it means to be a disciple/learner/follower. If we are like those first disciples, Jesus needs to tell us over and over again what it means to follow.

It is easy enough in our world today to look at the gospel as yet another way to shore up our security. We want Jesus to take care of us. For many moderns, the church has become yet another example of how we serve customers through church programs. In our modern 21st century church, Mark constantly reminds us, like Peter: “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.”

A tourist who attended the passion play at Oberammergau, Germany, some years ago went backstage at the conclusion to meet Mr. Anton Lang (17 January 1875 – 30 May 1938). He played the part of Christ in the play. After taking a picture of Anton Lang, the tourist noticed in a corner the great cross which Mr. Lang had carried in the play.

“Here, dear,” he said quickly to his wife, “you take my camera. When I lift up the cross up on my shoulder, you snap my picture.” Before Mr. Lang could say anything, the tourist had stooped down to lift it to his shoulder, but he could not budge it one inch off the floor . . . they had made the cross of heavy iron oak beams. Puffing with amazement, the man turned to Mr. Lang. “Why, I thought it would be light,” he said, I thought the cross was hollow. Why do you carry a cross that is so terribly heavy?”

Mr. Lang replied softly, “Sir, if I did not feel the weight of His cross, I could not play His part” (Glendon E. Harris, *Pulpit Resource*, Volume 10, Number 1: January—March 1982, p. 36).

Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he told us, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

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