

Sermon 091315 Selfishness
Scripture Mark 8: 27-38
Sermon Title- Gain and Loss

Charlemagne, who lived from 747 to 814AD, the good and benevolent ruler of the Franks, reigned for forty-six years and left a distinguished record of loyalty to faith and education. When he died, this wise and honored king was not buried traditionally as if sleeping on his back. Rather, he was buried seated on his throne in his robes of state with an open Bible on his lap, one dead cold finger pointed to the words we just heard from Jesus in this morning's Gospel. "What good would it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his own soul?" (Matt 16: 26)

Why did Charlemagne do that? Clearly, this passage held great significance for him and his own life, his own story. It is amazing how the Bible penetrates a person's psyche. I'll take a guess why Charlemagne held his finger onto this message as he transitioned into death and beyond. He himself had pretty much gained the whole world, or what was known of it. He had more riches, power, and fame than anyone else in his world. Either he feared that he had forfeited his own soul to get the world or maybe he had managed to keep his soul in spite of all he had gained in the world. Either way, it was clearly the struggle of Charlemagne's life. The passage, "What good would it be for a man if he gains

the whole world, yet forfeits his own soul?” represents the tipping point of how Charlemagne lived and died.

Money, power, fame. These are the great seductions of this world. People seek one, two, or all three. Few ever prosper in one- let alone two or three like Charlemagne did. Yet the excitement and enjoyment in seeking the allurements of the world is powerful. At some level, we know that having them is never truly satisfying; yet the dream is still there. We need only look back to the beginning in the third chapter of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, to find Adam and Eve seduced by the serpent into eating of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so that they will “be like God.” (Gen 3:5) A few chapters later the people of Babel built the tower, “to make a name for themselves.” (Gen 11:4) The world is full of seductions. These seductions all play upon one dark and compelling aspect of human nature: selfishness.

Selfishness is a driving force in people. Selfishness is the concern for one’s own profit or pleasure with little or no regard for others. Selfishness is about putting yourself first. In a certain sense, selfishness keeps the world running. People are running after money, status, pleasure, and influence. This is the playing field of the world. The world is about commerce, power, and notoriety. The world honors people who are attractive and

productive. It reveres winners and scorns losers. There was a billboard at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta that said, “You don’t win the silver medal. You lose the gold.” There are winners and losers in most aspects of life and most people spend a lot of time worrying that they won’t measure up. If you are in the game, you need to be ready to fight for yourself. That’s the way it is. Yes sirree, Bob.

We know the phrase, “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” We also learn that, “Nice guys finish last.” At some level we know that these statements are not true, but at another level we know that they are. Another well known cliché is, “It’s a dog eat dog world out there.” The world teaches you to be selfish, to watch out for yourself, to get the other guy before he gets you. If you don’t watch out for yourself, nobody will watch out for you.

Selfishness drives so many people. It determines how many people decide on a career, how many people vote, how many people dress, how many people conduct themselves in conversations, how they view others and themselves, and how they treat others. Selfishness has a prison like aspect. If you are only interested in yourself, getting that new car, or that nicer house, or more fame or recognition, or more influence and power; you are in a prison from which there is no escape. As soon as you get the thing you yearn for, it is on to the next thing.

The reality is that this world where selfishness is rewarded is a harsh and stormy place. Heck, we're talking about people clawing to get ahead. Just keeping up is hard enough. The competition is everywhere and it is fierce. Each and every one of us is descended from fighters. We have in our blood the genes of people who survived famine, floods, pestilence, drought, war, hunger, poverty, alienation, discrimination, and oppression. Our ancestors survived through millennia on this earth because of grit and determination. What did they gain? The world; or just a chance to stay here.

So what if someone wins the game and gains the whole world. What does he gain? I will tell you. The whole world is a vast nervous disorder, apparently headed for destruction. Modern science and human sinfulness have managed to cut deep scars in this wondrous creation. It is hard to determine what to believe, but between global politics, economics, environmental issues, war and famine; we may not gain much at all if we gain the whole world. But let us not be too grim. Maybe the world's best days are ahead. Still, the end edges closer in one way or another...both the end of the world and the end of us in this world. We can't take any of those possessions with us when we die. John D. Rockefeller was one of those 'gain the world' characters. When he died, someone asked his accountant how much John D. left. The accountant said

simply, “All of it.” So what do we win by gaining the world?
More importantly, what do we lose?

“What good will it be for a man if he gains the world, yet forfeits his soul.” If we lose our soul in the midst of the battle to gain the world, we lose our future, our selves, and our relationship with God.

As Christians, we look to Jesus Christ to inform us as to how we are to live our lives. We also look to him to be a harbor in the stormy seas of life. Jesus Christ is the shelter from this selfish world. He is the hiding place from the tempest, from the cruel storm. He is the rock in a weary world. Where is there safety? Where is there solace? In God. He also reminds us that there is more to life than the rat race, much more.

When Jesus says, “What good will it do a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” I don’t think he is saying don’t try in this life. I think working hard to support your family is a good and honorable thing and I see nothing in the teachings of Jesus that makes me think he’d disagree. I think he’s talking in degrees. Don’t focus your whole being on gaining worldly goods. Selfishness blinds us to what is important, namely God. We won’t lose our souls if our efforts in this world are through the lens of God. Keep God with you. Keep love in your heart, be kindly and generous, forgive, and be compassionate.

I read recently of an old woman on her deathbed. She was telling her grandchild that life is like a pie. You give a piece to your family, you give a piece to your friends, you give a piece to your education, you give a piece to your recreations, and you give a piece to your work. She said, “Never give the whole pie. Keep two pieces: one keep for yourself and one is for God.” AMEN