

Second Sunday in Lent
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA
25 February 2018

Mark 8:31-38

I have been thinking about what makes for a good life. I have had many conversations with people who are about to die and many of them say, “I have had a good life” by which they mean, “I have had a good husband or wife, I have had several children, God has blessed me with a great job, I have been able to travel and see the world, I have eaten in good restaurants and vacationed in nice places, I have a beautiful home, etc.” For some others a good life is measured in years, “I have lived to be 90, I consider myself blessed. I have had a good life.” Whatever the answer, common elements of what a good life entails are love, security, family, health, and friends.

In many ways, Peter considers his life to be a good life. The movement Jesus began is going very well. They have disciples from all over Israel, especially in Galilee. Jesus has tapped into a deep need in people, and he has done a great job at responding to people’s needs. There is an awesome power in his words and actions, and people really love being with him and following him. Peter himself has ascended to a position of respect and authority within the group and he loves this position of leadership. A few verses before the passage for today, Peter has rightly identified Jesus as the Messiah. We know because of Matthew and Luke that Jesus called Peter “blessed” because God had chosen to reveal this answer to him, while hiding it from the wise and learned.

Peter loves Jesus and he loves this movement they have created. He believes Jesus to be the Messiah and he believes the movement is destined for great things. But, just as he is feeling confident and excited about their future, “Jesus began to teach his disciples 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.” There is an image Peter knows well about what Messiah will be like, and Peter loves this image. It is the image of the Son of Man from Daniel, chapter 7. In the passage, Daniel has a terrifying dream where “four great beasts came up out of the sea”. These beasts represented the great powers of the world, and indeed all the oppressive forces of sin. They are now before the throne of God awaiting their judgement. Daniel then sees one like a “Son of Man” who was “coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.”

Peter is quite fine with the idea of Jesus being the Messiah who is the divine *Son of Man* of Daniel. One with great power and authority. One with great dominion over everything, whose job as King is to judge the world. This image of Jesus fits within Peter’s version of a good life. They are part of a powerful movement, and their leader is God’s own Son, who has come to defeat the evil powers of the world. Even if Peter doesn’t at this point know how Jesus will accomplish this, he knows he will accomplish these tasks. He sees himself as on the side of God, and he will see the restoration of Israel. Truly this is a good

life. He has never felt closer to God, he has a great group of friends, and Jesus has just declared him blessed or holy, which means he has been set-aside for the service of God as a leader. He will lead and others will follow. But, of course, Jesus statements about death threaten this good life. Peter's rebuke of Jesus is understandable. Jesus's new plans don't fit within Peter's 5-year plan. His plan is a lot simpler: Jesus will lead the nation to a glorious revival of what is truly important about their faith, this revival will lead to a tremendous increase of patriotism, and this patriotism will lead the nation to rise up behind Messiah to finally rid Israel of the oppressive Roman empire. Once free, Israel would welcome the age of the Messiah, where he will reign supreme and Peter himself will be at his right side, vested with great power and authority. This much he knows because Jesus has made it clear that Peter will be a leader on whose authority Jesus will build an entire movement.

Jesus's grim predictions threaten all of this. Peter's rebuke is meant to convince Jesus that there is no need to scare the followers. Can he just be the victorious Messiah of Daniel without all this talk about death. Jesus, on the other hand, knows that, as Messiah, he is both the *Son of Man* of Daniel and the *Suffering Servant* of Isaiah 53, and that he must accomplish his mission through death and resurrection, as the scriptures make plain and as he himself has predicted. He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." In other words, "Peter, you love the good life we have right now, you want to build tents on high ground, and I know you love me. You feel at the right side of history and enjoy this new community. You wait for the liberation of Israel and envision a glorious revolution, but this is not God's plan. The *good life* has clouded your mind and heart. There is a deeper mission for which we must work, one that includes the real possibility of death. You must trust and get behind me. One day, others will follow you as leader, but for now, you must get behind me and let me lead."

Jesus then called the crowds and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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." The expression, "Deny yourself" could be understood as "Place the mission ahead of your sense of a good life." We have a tendency to let the Status Quo determine how we lead our lives. We have our little routines and practices that give us a sense of order and purpose. But, often, these little routines and traditions, these things that make up a "good life" often get in the way of the mission God has given us to do. We become set in our ways, accustomed to a certain sense of sadness, used to our own little dramas and crisis situations, dependent on our daily moments of joy, codependent on those people who need us so much we could never think about doing something different or risking change. The word used for "life" here in this passage is the word from which we get *Psyche*. It is often used to signify what differentiates a dead person from one who is alive: the soul, the mind, the self. In a way, Jesus is saying, "What will it profit a person to gain the whole world and loose themselves?"

We live in a culture where many people have lost themselves. On the surface they look successful, happy, well adjusted, in control of their lives. But, underneath the facade, they lead lives of quiet desperation, as a poet used to say. They have allowed their version of what makes for a good life to get them off course, to walk away from God's plans for them,

to create new “selves”, new personas. Let me give you an example. A few years ago, one of you asked me if I would visit a friend at their home because she was having some issues and was too embarrassed to seek help. I agreed, even though the lady was not an Episcopalian. (It is not her fault she is not perfect!) I walked into this palatial home, adorned with many antiques and expensive furniture. Perhaps one of the most beautiful homes I had ever seen. The lady met me at the door, wearing dark glasses. After we sat down to talk, I decided I would not play the games I used to play as a therapist, but got directly to the point. I asked her, “When was the last time he hit you?” In tears, she responded, “Last Friday” (4 days prior to my meeting). I asked her to take the glasses off and saw her black eye. Trying hard to repress my rage, I asked, “Why haven’t you left?” She said, “Father, we have such a good life!” I said, “I get it! I know exactly what you are talking about.” I know it is extremely hard to walk away from what you consider a good life, but I also know that God’s will for our lives does not have room for humiliation, codependence, and domestic violence. Sometimes we let a “good life” obscure the goal line, and we settle mid-way, thinking that this is as much as we deserve, and that we are being obedient to God by settling mid-way.

Peter knows who Jesus is, but he can’t understand what Jesus must do and where Jesus is going. He is comfortable settling mid-way or following a course of action that has more to do with him than it has to do with Jesus’ mission. Today, Jesus tells Peter, sometimes the “good life” will lead you to lose your self, follow the wrong path, create a wrong persona, and live in the shadows of unreality. Sometimes a self-centered orientation to life will lead you to create a life that is very different from the life God wants you to lead. It is natural to do all in our power to protect that status quo and “the good life”, even when that is not what God wants you to do. You accept abuse because you believe that is what you must do to have a “good life”. You sacrifice your soul, your mental health, your very life to promulgate a narrative of the good life because of fear of facing your reality, taking up your cross, and following Jesus where he leads the way, even when this means leaving the security of our comfortable lives behind. Sometimes the “good life” is the enemy of obedience to God and faith in his love and provision for us.

There is an indication in the reading today that carrying our cross includes an element of proclamation and affirmation of our faith in Jesus. He says, “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.” I wonder how often I have shied away from telling others about my faith in Jesus because I don’t want to jeopardize a “good life”. I don’t want to isolate powerful people. I don’t want others to think less of me. I don’t want to upset the comfortable with the inconvenient truths of a belief system that requires sacrifice and cross-bearing. My friends, if you find yourself leading lives of quiet desperation today, where you appear to be doing so well, while walking further and further away from the life God intends you to have, I encourage you to face Jesus as he comes down the hill today, picks up his cross, and marches towards Jerusalem. Join him in this quest, as you carry your own cross. He will give you the strength to go on and he will never forget you nor abandon you. May he continue to bless you, Fr. Roldan+