

March 1, 2015

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

Mark 8:31-38

I believe the Publisher's Clearing House award was recently given. I assume none of you won it - \$5000 per week for life plus the life of someone you designate. It sounds like a lot of money at first. When you take a step back and think about it, it doesn't come to quite so much. Multiply that out into an annual amount, take away for taxes, and you discover that while it's still no pile of money to sneeze at, it's really just a nice salary for a successful business owner, or a salary for an upper level manager. You haven't suddenly become mega rich.

I assume a lot of people let themselves daydream about what it would be like to win. What trips would they take? What would they buy? Maybe they'd give some to favorite charities, what would they be?

Count me among those who daydreamed a bit. Perhaps it's because I'm a pastor and think about these things, or perhaps it's because I'm just plain weird, but I thought about what it would be like to win and then at the end of my life have a conversation with God about what I did with the winnings. What

would I want to aspire to do with that money? Certainly I couldn't feel good about spending all of the money selfishly on myself. Would I just give it all away to charities and keep nothing? There's more to that than just being a martyr. How do you do it responsibly? What charities would I choose and how would I go about choosing them?

Let's say I decided to give heavily to our church. I'd decide to end tight budgets at this church for the rest of my life. Or I'd decide to pay off the mortgage that we took out to build this sanctuary. At first glance that sounds great! Think of all the ministries we could do if we had significantly more money!

But then think about it some more. Would it be all that great? We have a large mortgage on this building and it's going to take something like twelve more years to pay it off. When it's paid off it will be our building that we all together worked together to pay for. Our annual budget, while usually very tight is our budget - our investment, our work. If someone came in and just starting throwing big sums of money around we'd quickly become lazy. Who cares whether you give offering or

not? The church is always there and with plenty of cash. Who really cares about the building? Someone else paid for it.

Isn't it true that the things we've worked for and earned are the things we appreciate the most? Don't we have to labor for what we have in order to really appreciate it?

I live in the City of Canandaigua and sometimes I look around at all the things that were built with the money Mary Clark Thompson threw around a hundred odd years ago. Tremendous sums of money were spent on any number of projects that weren't economically viable in the short run or in the long run. Was it money well spent?

The biggest problem most programs that seek to lift people out of poverty have is to be able to give real aid without it being received with either a sense of entitlement - or being received in a way that preserves the dignity of the person who is needy. When trying to help poor people you learn pretty

quickly that if you give a poor person a lot of money you still have a poor person - who happens to have money.

When all of these thoughts rattle around in my head and I consider what a conversation with God about winning the Publisher's Clearing House sweepstakes would be like, it starts to feel like a pretty big burden. What would I really do if I started receiving lots of money that I didn't earn or was just lucky to get and didn't really deserve?

At the end of the day I'm glad that God blessed me with the ability to work, and to earn, and to contribute. I can contribute to this church, to this community, to this nation, and ultimately to God's redeeming work. I can't really ask for anything more than that.

So let's say you won the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes. The prize patrol shows up in the morning with cameras and balloons and a big certificate with your name on it verifying the prize. You open the door and there they are. You're supposed to be excited beyond belief. You should cheer at your good fortune! But instead you say, "Let me go back to

my room, shut the door, and pray to God about how to handle this. Be patient. I might be awhile."

You'd be the laughingstock of every talk show in the country! They'd be saying, "Did you see that fruitcake who won the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes? What a religious nut job!"

One day Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered, "Some say John the Baptist and others Elijah and still others one of the prophets." Then Jesus said, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter replies, "You are the Messiah." We always envision that scene where Peter is serious and pious and serene. That's probably a pretty accurate way to picture it. But it could also be with the attitude, "Who do we say you are? You 'da man Jesus! You 'da man! ...Oh and by the way, when you get that Publishers Clearing House prize - that \$5000 a week for life - which one of us are you going to name as your right hand man who gets the prize after you ah,... snuff it you know? Because you are single and all, and you don't have any kids."

Our gospel reading for today picks up right after Peter answers that Jesus is the Messiah - or that Jesus is 'da man. In our gospel reading Jesus says he's going to be tested by the religious and government leaders and he'll be rejected. He'll suffer a lot. And then he'll be executed. That's not what Publisher's Clearing House Prize winners say. Peter takes Jesus to task for it. But Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

That is one of the most condemning things ever said. Did you notice what Jesus meant there? Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not of divine things but on human things.

On one hand there are divine things. On the other hand there are Satanic things. And guess which hand human things fall on? There's no in-between. ...Satanic things. Jesus says that the human point of view is evil. It is Satan's point of view. The human point of view looks to the world for trust and security instead of God. Jesus goes on to elaborate about that when he says, "For those who want to save their life will lose

it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Christians will talk about bearing a cross. That does not mean being a martyr or dying for someone else's sins. Jesus already did that. And you don't have to go looking for a cross either. If you take the attitude that what God has given you in talents and abilities is not for your own wealth collection, but for the growth and betterment of others, and if you make decisions where you truly don't think about yourself but thoughtfully consider other people, and if you live in a way where you aren't always having to have the praise and approval of others; you will be different. You will stand out. And in one form or another you'll discover that is a cross you are bearing.

Our world does not know what to do with people who truly give of themselves without expectation of return. They aren't playing by the rules, and so they must be punished. Perhaps just subtly or maybe forcefully, but it'll be there.

But as Jesus teaches, the whole situation is ironic. Those who want to save their life will lose it. But those who lose their life for my sake will save it. You are your most true, powerful and capable self when you are giving of yourself. May you have the wisdom and courage to do that and may you know fullness of life in this lifetime and the next. Amen