

When A Good Life is Not “The Good Life”

Mark 8:31-38

I have a friend I’ve known since my early teens who seems to have a Midas touch and live a truly golden life by most standards. For instance, I taught him how to play the guitar and within the decade he became the lead guitarist of a nationally-known band. That allowed him to meet and marry the girl of many-a-man’s dreams and to this day they are still together in what seems to be a wonderful marriage, complete with attractive and successful college-aged children.

Much of Artie’s success is self-generated. While in his early thirties, he read about an upstart direct sales company and immediately went to work for them, marketing telecommunications, energy, and other essential services for home and business—a company that has now grown into the largest of its kind in the world. Since it operates much like Amway and many other franchise programs, those at the top, like Artie, do quite well, while all the labor below works hard with endless hope that they will become rich by selling products and recruiting others to join the business. Many of them do.

Artie is the “poster boy” for the company, as he became one of their early champions in recruitment and now oversees their European market, flying across the pond virtually every month or two, speaking at huge company rallies in London, Amsterdam, Rome, Lisbon, and everywhere else I’d love to visit—appearing like a rock star in front of adoring crowds numbering in the thousands—staying in the best hotels and eating at the finest restaurants and apparently beloved by everyone he meets (he’s a motivational speaker with good humor and charisma). Then he flies home to one of his two mansions in New Hampshire, while enjoying his leisure

time with family or driving his Maserati around New England or using his season tickets to the Celtics, Patriots, and Red Sox every free weekend. By most standards, he's got an amazing life and why it makes business sense to let everyone know about it. You might think Artie would be a self-possessed jerk, but instead, he's a genuinely nice, trustworthy, and generous guy!

An honest assessment might be, what happened to me? Artie offered me the opportunity to join him years ago, but I turned him down. Do I regret it? On occasion, I suppose. Yet, I realize what has turned out to be a good life for him, would not necessarily have been so for me. For one thing, I'm not wired to be as extroverted before strangers or ambitious in market selling as he is. He's a natural at it. I'm also less opportunistic than he is and certainly not as aggressive as it takes to be a successful entrepreneur. Sure, I'd love all the benefits and privileges that he has enjoyed, but I'm not sure I would have (or liked) what it takes to get there.

Somewhere along the way, I, like most people, made choices for the kind of life I considered "good." The constellation of values, ambitions, interests, skills, discipline, and dedication in each of us lead to decisions that appear, at least at some point along the way, to be the right ones for us. Sometimes choices work out and sometimes they don't. Honestly, knowing Artie, there could even be moments when he admires and envies me. Or maybe not.

How does any of us calculate what is a good life for us, other than through the values we hold most dear? Is it the same for everyone? Obviously, no. Are there even universal standards that we measure human existence by, or do they differ as well, depending upon one's culture or station in life? Certainly, American culture goes a long way in promoting

the belief that prosperity and affluence, celebrity and status, uniqueness and personal achievement, are worthwhile standards to measure ourselves by. We evaluate people all the time by these metrics. But are those standards everyone can attain? Clearly not. And what gets sacrificed on the altar of that version of success?

I do think this is one of the rubs of religion, insofar as most faith traditions tend to be a counterpoint and downplay the value of worldly gain. With the exception of the “prosperity Gospel” promoted by many TV evangelists, the spirituality behind religious beliefs and traditions, as a whole, is more about letting go of much of worldly standards, largely because wisdom shows that the pursuit of material possessions, wealth, power, privilege and other perks in life often bring upon people great stress and sorrow as well as division and injustices in communities. Material wealth and possessions can be unforeseen sources of cumber that restrict a person’s freedom, as much as they may seem to relieve us from worry. For that reason, religious traditions typically offer wisdom and perspective to help people rethink what has the greatest purpose and value in life.

In a profound way, the Gospel stories of Jesus do this by focusing on a dramatically contrasting image—one that is difficult for many to grasp, not to mention abide by. That is the cross—more specifically, in words attributed to Jesus in our text for this morning:

If anyone wants 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

What does this suggest about what is truly good in life? Does it mean that The Good Life is not necessarily a good life?

Let me state outright that the message of the cross which brought about an end to Jesus' life on earth is frequently misunderstood and misconstrued by modern ears and minds. It would be very difficult for any of us to fully grasp the shock and shame associated with this brutal form of human execution, let alone for it to be promoted as a spiritually noble path to take. In the first century world, it represented the exact opposite of a good life. Those who were crucified were publicly scorned and displayed in a humiliating and shameful manner, fully naked and without any shred of dignity—which was precisely the point. Unlike public executions in modern times, the Roman use of crucifixion was effective as a deterrent against insurrection; no one, under any circumstance, would want to face this fate. It was one of the worst ways to die, because the executed soon became associated more with public atrocity and putrid stench than any noble cause. Passersby wanted crucifixions to end because, even for those times, they were gruesome to witness as the body hung there day after day until death and the rotting flesh was eaten off the bones by scavenging birds.

Frankly, I've struggled to understand how Jesus would have uttered this proposition prior to the last week of his life (when his fate became more real); I've assumed the notion of taking up a cross was later attributed to him by his disciples after the fact. Why? Beforehand, to command followers to take up their cross would have seemed absurd and surely ineffective in recruitment. In our story, I should think Peter's reaction would have been even stronger than Jesus's had he claimed this was to be their collective fate—for Jesus to assume they were all to lose their lives in a futile confrontation with Rome resulting in their summary executions by crucifixion. There's nothing that appears worthwhile or rewarding in pursuing this path!

Of course, Christian tradition has glossed over this and romanticized the theology of the atonement so that we come to these stories missing their point and instead expressing awe and joy in Jesus's holy and sacred sacrifice on the cross. But to celebrate this gruesome destiny is a strange dogma, to be sure, and it's also blinded us to the purpose of our present passage, i.e., that to be Jesus's follower, each one must take up their own cross.

Obviously, this passage makes little sense if it's understood through the interpretive lens of the atonement. In that light, each follower of Jesus then would be destined to be an atoning sacrifice to save others from sin. If so, this doesn't square with the Pauline argument that the atonement was solely Jesus's sacrifice. I hope you can see the mixed-up conundrum this creates for traditional Christian beliefs. If the cross is Jesus's destiny as the universal atonement for sin, then why are his followers asked to do the same? Wasn't Jesus's death sufficient?

In the same way, bearing the cross wasn't intended to be the normal burdens of life, either (e.g., "I've got my cross to bear..."); that only diminishes the meaning of Jesus's death. So, then, what does it mean to take up the cross? How are we to understand it?

It seems to me, as far as the Gospels are concerned, to take up the cross meant to follow the very path and destiny of Jesus—a destiny which will eventually result in something quite different from the proverbial "good life" to which most people aspire.

For me, it's apparent that the cross doesn't make sense unless it's understood within the broader context of Jesus' ministry and what he was up to. Luke captured the "gospel" Jesus was proclaiming in the recitation of Isaiah 61 in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4:16-21):

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news [gospel] to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor [or Jubilee, the year of amnesty when all debts were canceled—good for the debtor, not so for the debt-holder!].

If you combine this with John the Baptist's proclamation earlier in Luke that I recited last Sunday where there were specific ethical demands made of people if they were to be baptized (Lk 3:7-14—to share with the poor, to not cheat, extort, and corrupt the system, etc.), it's obvious that the gospel's good news is directly related to how people experience daily life, especially who benefits and who loses in the economic, political, and social order. Originally, the gospel wasn't about anyone's place in eternity; it was how to bring heaven's values to earth!

So with this in mind, what typically happens whenever a charismatic leader stand rises up, or a social movement emerges, to give voice to those oppressed in society or to challenge the current order that favors some with abundance and power, while denying that to virtually everyone else? Social prophets like this get targeted and silenced. It happens everywhere. Political and religious leaders get taken out. Until movements rise up enough to create a tipping point which undermines the status quo and transforms the entire system, those who hold office (or wield power behind the scenes) find ways to eliminate prophets and truth-tellers. That's the way the world usually works.

This is what happened to John the Baptist and Jesus—both were executed. It's important to grasp this to understand why Jesus ended up on a cross; in the historical moment, it was prudent for the powerful to silence him. Jesus would have grasped this, particularly when he discerned his ultimate betrayal. So, if he did utter these words, if Jesus commanded his followers to take up their cross, the intention must have been for them to

take seriously what they were embarking upon and what was about to happen, so that they would be ready to take up the cause should he be silenced. Their shared destinies would be the cross until the entire order was transformed into the realm that God promised. They were revolutionaries in a true sense, but a nonviolent revolution of values (e.g., Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., et. al.) that would transform the hearts and souls of even their most strident adversaries. That is what I believe is meant by taking up the cross to follow Jesus—at least in its original sense. It was to follow his path to eliminate the injustices of earth to bring forth a good life for all people, instead of merely for the favored few.

As you might imagine, the ramifications of this gospel proclamation are both breathtaking and earth-shaking! This could well explain why Christian tradition has largely blunted the power of the good news that Jesus proclaimed and instead romanticized the Gospel, reducing “deliverance” and “salvation” to a private transaction of divine forgiveness and grace. That message has broad appeal, I agree. If Christians declare that Jesus carries the weight of the cross for all human sin, then it minimizes a demand on anyone else. No one else need bear the cross, and we can all go on with our normal business. It doesn’t even raise much of a challenge to the world order (especially when Christianity has been the state or majority religion), since the good news of salvation through Jesus is only pertains to eternity, not the present.

Yet, this begs an honest and provocative question: if nothing really changes in the end, then are we to conclude that Jesus’s death didn’t accomplish much? If we are no closer to fulfilling the goals of the gospel 2000 years later, was it worth it for Jesus to die on the cross?

I imagine, Jesus could have avoided his fate by staying home in Nazareth, perhaps building his little woodworking business into some larger enterprise, where his income could provide an affluent and comfortable life in Galilee. It could have happened since the Romans were in the process of building their new city of Sepphoris a half-dozen miles from Nazareth during Jesus' lifetime. He could have become rich building up his construction empire. That would have been a good life. His disciples could have admired him from afar, perhaps studied his entrepreneurial drive and attempted to follow his well-earned path to The Good Life. With God on his side, Jesus could have had it all: the benefits and privileges of first century Galilee, cooperating with the elite of society, supporting Roman's role in policing the state to make sure no thieves or bandits stole his property and no rebels would challenge the current order or undermine his privileged position in society. He could have embodied the good life in his time, enjoyed by a few at the expense of all.

Instead, Jesus left the comforts of his home to follow the lead of John the Baptizer in proclaiming that things had to change, once and for all. No more would the words of the Prophets be for mere ceremony—recited and celebrated in houses of worship; rather, they would be proclaimed in the streets of villages and towns as a manifesto for social and political change. The Jesus movement would guarantee that God cared for the poor and the outcast and Israel would be redeemed once God brought justice to earth.

When Jesus and his disciples made a conscious choice against The Good Life for an itinerant one proclaiming their provocative message as good news for the poor, it would promise with it a cross to bear—a cross that silenced the voice but not the message of the prophets—a cross that

continues to be borne by those who proclaim the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

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