

LENT 2B - February 25, 2018

Catching Up

(Mark 8:31-38)

Jim Somerville, the well-known preacher and pastor of First Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, has written about receiving a request from a classmate at the Phillips Exeter Academy – the upper-class New England boarding school located in Exeter, New Hampshire that he had attended in his youth – for an update on his life. But even though he is certainly respected in church-related circles – well respected, in fact – he was reluctant to comply with the request, however, because, as he puts it, when comparing his life with the successful and glamorous lives of his classmates, (quote unquote) “the competition is just too intense.”

Now even though I did *not* attend such a prestigious private high school but instead went to Freehold Township, a *public* high school just down the street from us here, I nevertheless kind of understand where he’s coming from, however. You see, since returning to the area last summer, I’ve had two occasions now to get together with former high school classmates of *mine* still living in the area. And while I thoroughly enjoyed catching up with them, it was also a little depressing, in some respects, to learn how accomplished some of *them* have become as well; the worst part of it probably being the fact that nearly all of them are already *retired*, or about to retire, while I am nowhere *near* that promised land as yet!

Now don’t get me wrong, I am very happy for my former classmates’ achievements, and don’t begrudge them a thing. But I, too, have felt, as Pastor Somerville apparently feels, that my own life pales in comparison to the success and accomplishments of some of those former high school classmates.

In fact, this was really brought home for me just the other week when, out of the blue, I got the following email from someone I went to high school with, *entitled* “Catching Up.” He had been a year behind me in school, but we had worked together for the Freehold Regional High School District Maintenance Department during our college summers. So we had become pretty good friends. Though, over the years, we had lost touch.

“Hey Ed,” the email began. “Can’t believe it’ll be 43 years in June since I graduated FTHS... I certainly won’t bore you with all the details of the last 43 years, but suffice it to say it’s been a GREAT (all capital letters)... a GREAT ride so far. Here’s a few highlights...”

He then went on to share that he had worked in New York City for a year after graduating from college, before becoming a sales rep in the gift industry for an agency based out of Boston. Worked there for 7 years and then bought the entire agency from the prior owner. A few years later, he went to work in the financial services industry and obtained all of the national securities licenses, while his wife continued to run their business; eventually building it to what it is today – one of the largest independent sales agencies on the East Coast with 12 fulltime sales reps working for her. “...we are now beginning to look at exit strategies,” he added.

Meanwhile, he got out of the brokerage business in 2008, “just before everything started to head south,” he noted, and decided to do something completely different. So he trained and learned the art of voice acting and became a “voice over” talent in 2010. He’s done a few local commercials in Connecticut and the Hudson Valley, but 98% of his work, he says, is corporate “so you probably haven’t heard my voice

anywhere.” In fact, he actually signed the email, not only with his name, but next to it the words: “Voice Over Talent.”

Now, again, I don’t begrudge him *one bit* of his considerable success and his many accomplishments. I think it’s fantastic and couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy. I truly mean that.

And lest you get the wrong impression, he also talked in that email about, after having a son of their own, he and his wife then adopted two biological brothers from the Department of Children and Families in Connecticut, as well as later filing for custody of an unwed sister-in-law’s daughter who had been born addicted to Vicodin. So obviously, he’s not just all about money and success...

But I do have a confession to make. (An appropriate thing to do in Lent, wouldn’t you say?) It’s simply this. The adoption of those two brothers and then getting custody of that niece were not the very first details in his email that caught my eye. Not at all, unfortunately. And that’s not about *him*, but about *me*. You see, what initially caught my eye, as I read his email, was when he talked about owning one of the largest independent sales agencies on the East Coast, then having a successful career in financial services, and finally transitioning and becoming a voice acting success as well.

Why? Because I immediately responded by focusing on comparing *my* accomplishments to *his*, and then feeling as though my life, somehow, didn’t quite measure up... Maybe, at times, you’ve even done something similar to this yourselves.

In fact, I’d go so far as to argue that, just like that Pastor Jim Somerville, we all at some point, and to some degree, take stock in our lives, and stop to consider what we have accomplished, or not accomplished,

especially in relation to our peers; like former classmates, for instance. And then feel as though we were somehow lacking.

The psychologist Erik Erikson even had a name for it, “Generativity vs. Stagnation,” the stage in life, he believed – between the ages of 40 and 65 – when we consider whether or not we have done something meaningful with our lives, and have made some lasting contribution. And if we conclude that we *haven't*, we may be left feeling as though our life has been without purpose.

It should come as no surprise then, really, that one of the all-time bestselling books – and not just for Christians either, mind you – was Pastor Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life*. Because we all, especially today, want to know and to feel that our life has had some meaning; that it served some purpose. And often, when confronted with the success and achievements of others, we feel as though we have a lot of *catching up* to do; to use that expression in another way.

But here’s the thing. The typical measuring sticks we use when making such an analysis of purpose and meaning and success, of course, are things like money... possessions... even fame or popularity.

“By our human nature,” says Michael Rogness, “we want to be prosperous, strong, successful, and influential.” But then the former professor at Luther Seminary adds *this*: “Jesus has *other* priorities... He, on the other hand, came to serve, not to *be served*. His ways are not *our* ways,” says Rogness, “yet he invites us to *follow him* and *his ways*.”

In this morning’s gospel reading, we heard how 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. In fact, according to Mark,

Jesus said this quite openly. Apparently, there was no mistaking or misunderstanding what he was saying or what he meant.

But how did Peter respond? He immediately began to rebuke Jesus. That is, he began to express his disapproval and criticism. Such a thing was unacceptable and unimaginable to Peter.

So what did Jesus do? He quickly turned, and addressing all of his disciples, not just Peter, *he* began to rebuke *Peter* in front of the others. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Pretty stern, wouldn't you say? Pretty harsh. Jesus not only quickly put Peter in his place, but he completely and without qualification rejected Peter's initial reaction to the prediction of Jesus' suffering and death as well. And then Jesus went on and spoke those words that have echoed all the way down through the centuries to our own day, “If any want to become my followers,” said Jesus, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

In other words, it comes down to the difference between being a follower and a “fan.” As Kyle Idelman notes, “The dictionary defines fans as ‘enthusiastic admirers.’ Jesus was never interested in enthusiastic admirers; he wanted completely committed followers. He wants more from us... He is looking for more than a prayer before a meal and a Jesus fish on the back of the car,” says Idelman. “He wants more than fans; he wants followers who take up a cross and die to themselves.”

However, as Thomas a Kempis, the German priest and spiritual writer of the late medieval period, once noted: “Jesus has many lovers of his heavenly kingdom... but few bearers of his cross.”

Elton Trueblood, the Quaker author and theologian, once wrote, “In many areas, the gospel, instead of taking *away* people’s burdens, actually *adds* to them.” According to Peter Marty, in order to illustrate this very point, Trueblood often told the story of John Woolman, a successful Quaker merchant of the 18th century, who lived a successful and comfortable life; that is, until God “convicted” him one day of his sin of owning slaves. As a result, this John Woolman gave up his prosperous business, and used the money now to try and *free* slaves instead. He even started wearing “undyed” suits to avoid relying on the dye *produced* by slave labor.

Elton Trueblood observed, “Occasionally we talk of our Christianity as something that *solves* problems, and there is a sense in which it does. Long before it does so, however,” said Trueblood, “it increases both the number and the intensity of problems.”

Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit priest and poet, who was an influential anti-war activist during the Vietnam era, was even more to the point. Whether you agree with his politics or not, his words nevertheless ring true. “If you want to follow Jesus,” he once said, “you had better look good on wood.”

Jesus then went on to say, “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.”

Remember that childhood saying, “Finders keepers, losers weepers”? When Jesus says that those who try to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for the sake of Jesus and gospel, will save

them, it's as if that old childhood saying has been completely reversed. In other words, according to Jesus, "Finders *weepers*, losers keepers."

"For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Jesus asked next. Now that's completely contrary to the ways of the world and even human logic, isn't it? Many Christians, including and especially American Christians, actually go ahead and *equate* wealth and prosperity *with* faith. TV preachers tell us all the time that, if we just follow Jesus, if we truly have faith, then we will have the life we always wanted. Money! Big house! (Make that, *homes*!) Fancy cars! Perfect health! No problems or challenges whatsoever!

But life – *real life* – doesn't work that way, however, does it?

Following the news of ex-Beatle George Harrison's death, "Today Show" anchor Anne Curry interviewed Anthony DeCurtis, a writer for Rolling Stone magazine. DeCurtis talked at length about Harrison's search for a meaningful spiritual life. Apparently Harrison was the most spiritual of all the Beatles. In fact, he was once quoted as saying, "Everything else in life can *wait*... but the search for God."

Now don't forget here that this was one of the Beatles. The Beatles, mind you! Someone who had achieved and experienced incredible, almost unmatched, popularity and acclaim and wealth. And yet, even for *him*, even for George Harrison, everything else in life apparently took a backseat to the search for God...

In 1000 A.D., or 186 years after the death of Charlemagne, the King of the Franks, the Lombards, and ultimately the Holy Roman Empire as well, officials re-opened Charlemagne's tomb. Before them there was an extraordinary sight. In the midst of all the finery that had been buried with him – the gold, the jewels, the priceless treasures – there was the

skeleton of Charlemagne himself, still seated on his throne, still wearing his crown. But in his lap there was a Bible, and a bony finger – it is said – still rested on these words of Mark 8:36: “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul.”

“Indeed,” said Jesus, “what can they give in return for their life?”

Haunting words... indeed. We can pursue every treasure and goal and achievement in this life. But if we do not have faith. If we do not deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus – if we do not love and serve as he did – it will have all been for nothing. Which means, of course, that comparing our lives and our accomplishments to those of others is, including our old friends and classmates, is, in the end, a lost and futile cause. Because it's not *about* money and fame and success. It never was and never will be. It's about following Christ...

Easier said than done, of course. As Mark Twain famously observed, “It ain't those parts of the Bible that I *can't* understand that bother me. It's the parts I *do* understand.”

Or the parishioner, who once said to his pastor as he shook hands with the minister on his way out of church one Sunday, “Powerful sermons, Pastor. Thoughtful and well researched. I can always see *myself* in them.” And then after the briefest of pauses, “So knock it off, will ya'!”

In the very last paragraph of his influential book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote this: “The principle runs through all of life, from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day, and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever

really be yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and *with Him* everything else thrown in.”

I’m sure that, now that I’m back in Freehold where I grew up, I will continue to get together to *catch up* with old friends. Just as I’m equally sure that, in many ways, I will, however, *never* catch up with what some of them have achieved or accomplished in life. But, again, that’s not what it’s all about, is it? Amen.