

Jesus' Great Questions: What Does It Do You to Gain the Whole World?

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Matthew 16:24-26

A Fred Craddock story – may sound familiar to some: “I think I was twenty years old when I read Albert Schweitzer’s *Quest for the Historical Jesus*. I found his theology woefully lacking – more water than wine. I marked it up, wrote in the margins, raised questions of all kinds. The one day I read that he was going to be in Cleveland to play the initial concert for a new organ in a big church up there. According to the article he would remain after the concert for conversation and refreshment. I bought a Greyhound bus ticket – (Craddock was living in Knoxville, TN) – and went to Cleveland. All the way there I worked on his book, laying out all my questions on a separate sheet of paper. I figured, if there was conversation following the concert, there would be room for question or two.

“I went there; I heard the concert; I then rushed into the church fellowship hall, got a seat in the front row, and waited with my questions. After a while, he came in – shaggy hair, big white mustache, stooped, and seventy-five-years old. He had played a marvelous concert. You know he was a master organist, medical doctor, philosopher, scholar, lecturer, writer... everything. He came in with a cup of tea and stood in front of the group. And there I was, right in front, with my questions. Dr. Schweitzer thanked everybody, saying, “You’ve been very warm and hospitable to me. I thank you for it. I wish I could stay longer among you, but I must go back to Africa, because my people are poor and diseased and hungry and dying. I have to go.’ Then he added, ‘We have a medical station at Lambarene. If there is anyone here in this room who has the love of Jesus, would you be prompted by that love to go with me and help me?’

Says Craddock, “I looked down at my questions; they were so absolutely stupid. And I learned, again, what it means to be a Christian and had hopes that I could be one someday.”

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.... For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world, but forfeit their life?” I wonder, is that really a message any of us want to hear? Is Jesus asking a question we would just as soon avoid?

Now instead of coming here today, you could have stayed home, turned on your television and heard some pastor with a perfect haircut and a church of thousands of members, tell you that if you become a Christian, your life will go much, much better – just start believing that good things will come your way and they will. If you do this, and have the right attitude about that, you will have a blessed life which will include material rewards. Essentially, with positive thinking, you can lift yourself up and save yourself. In truth, when I listen to some of these folks, I’m not clear why we need Jesus at all? It really is all about me and my attitude, with the added assurance that God wants me to succeed as this culture defines success – get more and more and the bigger the better - the Gospel of prosperity. Now as I say this, I am very aware that I don’t have a 30,000 member church and am not watched on television by millions of people every Sunday. So maybe I’m just bitter and jealous. (Say it ain’t so!)

Except, as I work my way through the gospels, it seems to me that Jesus has some doubts about this particular definition of success, indeed about this particular interpretation of his gospel. Where exactly does picking up a cross and following Jesus fit into this promise of happiness and prosperity? Yes, Jesus wants us to have a good life, but what does he mean by “good?” Again, as I read scripture, I cannot find snappy, memorable slogans intended to make us healthy, wealthy and wise. He does not provide a five point guide to financial success. And I can’t find any of Jesus’ teachings with the title, “Everything You Need to Know about Finding Happiness.” In fact, what we find are words that confront and challenge our cultural and popular definitions of success and happiness and the good life. And, of course, always the maddening questions: “What will it profit you if you gain the whole world – everything you ever wanted, all that money can buy – and forfeit your life?” Sometimes Jesus is just no fun at all.

Remember this “Peanuts” cartoon? Charlie Brown is reading a newspaper article to Lucy. “It says here that young people of today don’t believe in any causes...”

Lucy responds: “That’s not true at all! I believe in a cause. I believe in ME! I’m my own cause. If I’m not a cause what is? I believe in the cause of good ol’ me. That’s the cause I believe in.” She walks away, still ranting and raving, “I’m the best cause I know, and I believe in that cause. I’m the...” All Charlie Brown can do is turn away and mutter, “Good Grief!”

Lucy might be the voice of 21st century America, perhaps even of the popular prosperity gospel, but somewhere along the way, in her focus on me and mine, she lost touch with the way of Jesus, with the way of the cross that he talks about. But just what is he talking about?

Another Fred Craddock story: “I’ll never forget the day Barbara Jenkins walked into the room. It was at a reception of some sort – people standing around, having a lot of conversation, but not really important. ‘Sure could use some more rain.’ ‘Yeah, been pretty hot too.’ And then Barbara Jenkins came in. There was something about the room that changed when she came in. ‘Is that Barbara?’ ‘Yeah, that’s Barbara Jenkins.’

“Barbara Jenkins spent her time writing letters, making calls, going and seeing folk to make a difference in the way the law treats juvenile offenders. Night and day, seven days a week, she worried the authorities to death. Once she was asked, ‘You enjoy doing that?’

“ ‘Well, not really.’

“ ‘You get paid, are you on salary?’

“ ‘Oh no.’

“ ‘Have you had children in trouble with the law and now you want...’

“ ‘No, no, my kids haven’t been in any trouble.’

“ ‘Then why in the world do you keep doing this? It’s no fun, you’re not making any money, and none of your friends are doing it.’

“To which she responded, ‘Because I have to.’” She sounds a lot like Albert Schweitzer.

I think the life of Barbara Jenkins, the choices she has made, the people she has fought for, give us an insight into the life Jesus is talking about. The image of taking up a cross is a difficult one to wrap one’s brain around – both in the first century and today. It was the Roman form of execution – terrifying and cruel and very public. To speak of a cross was to speak of defeat and death. Imagine if we put a sign outside the church on highway 116 – “Join us on Sunday to learn of suffering and struggle and death.” Yeah, that world really pack ‘em in. But what if for Jesus, the path of the cross is not the path of defeat, but of transformation – of dying to the old so that the new might be born? New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, another one of my theological mentors whom we have lost, liked to say that when Jesus spoke of death, of taking up the cross, of losing our life to find our life, he had in mind two deaths: the dying of the self as the center of its own concern and dying to the world as the center of security and identity. Said Borg, “The world to which one must die is the world of conventional wisdom, the world of culture with its preoccupying securities; and the self which must die is the self-preoccupied self,” the self that is obsessed with comfort and safety, the self that defines itself according to the demands of culture. Only then, after such a death, can we re-center ourselves on God, on the things that matter. And so of course Jesus would ask, “What will it profit you if you gain the whole world – meet all the demands of culture and conventional wisdom – but in the process forfeit your true life?”

Says another Biblical scholar, Tom Long: “Cross bearers forfeit the game of power before the first inning. They are drop-outs in the school of self-promotion. They do not pick up their crosses as a means for personal fulfillment, career advancement or self-expression; rather they deny themselves and pick up their crosses, like their Lord, because of the needs of other people – standing with those who are weak, opening the doors to those who are unacceptable, loving those who are unlovely... Bearing a cross may look to the world like a tragedy, but in God’s eyes it is a triumph.” Albert Schweitzer, Barbara Jenkins, Jesus of Nazareth, seemed to get that, they embraced it, and they never looked back.

Last week I quoted Barbara Brown Taylor – I always quote Barbara Brown Taylor – but I return to her today: “Following Jesus means receiving our lives as gifts instead of guarding them as our own possessions. It means sharing the life we have been given instead of bottling it for our own consumption. It means giving up the notion that we can build dams to contain the bright streams of our lives and letting them go instead, letting them swell their banks and spill their wealth, running full and growing fuller.”

One Sunday after worship, he was asked if he would be willing to volunteer in an after school reading program at a neighborhood elementary school. He protested that he knew nothing about kids or teaching kids, but finally, reluctantly agreed to do it one afternoon a week and no more. Two months later he was at the school three afternoons a week. His pastor asked, “Did you find that you really had a gift for teaching reading to young children?”

He replied, ‘No, I found out that the Holy Spirit had decided to use me, even me, as a gift for a bunch of needy kids. Two of them are now attending church with me on Sundays.’ I guess that Jesus fellow really knew what he was talking about.