

August 30, 2020 Pentecost 13A
Matthew 16:21-28 and Romans 12:9-21
Living By Faith: The Good Life

I was blessed with good parents. Out of necessity, they went to work right out of high school, college not being an option. After my brother, Chris, was in kindergarten, my mom went back to college and got her teaching agree. My parents worked hard for their modest salaries, and they saved when most people of my generation would have spent--with two memorable exceptions. One was family vacations and one was Christmas. They took us great places. They often gave Chris and me more than they could reasonably afford. Their rationale was, I imagine, "We want you boys to have what we didn't have." So on Christmas day, for example, Chris and I would open an embarrassment of riches while my parents would open a box or two. They sacrificed so that they could give us "the good life."

Ironically, though, I did learn a great deal about the good life from my parents, but not in the way that they intended. It's tempting for those who have not grown up with much to confuse the good life with having goods and plenty of them and showering gifts on others.

Brenda and I have often fallen into that deceptive trap, even though experience alone should have taught us better. I can still remember one Christmas morning when our children were very young. We had spent more than our budget, which wasn't much, to buy them the hottest toys on the market. We couldn't wait for them to rush into the room and dance with delight at getting the desire of their hearts. Well, you can guess what happened. The boxes the toys came in turned out to provide more entertainment than the toys themselves.

As for myself, I should have learned the good life lesson long before that. As a teen, I loved playing soccer, and to love playing soccer meant that you had to have a pair of Adidas cleats. The only made 3 kinds and there was a certain kind you had to have. If you were to run fast, control the ball and score a lot of goals, you had to have a pair of Adidas Gerd Muller's.

Not seeing these shoes as the necessity that I saw, my otherwise generous folks held the line on this purchase and told me to save for them myself. So save I did. And when I purchased my first pair of Adidas, I nearly glided

out of that shoe store. It only took one soccer game, though, to realize that I had been duped. I still didn't run faster. I couldn't control the ball any better. I couldn't score more goals.

As an adult, I can't tell you how many times I've sought the good life by buying a new fishing rod that will cast like a laser or a new computer that "will dance rings around that old jalopy" or a new car that will always look new, never accumulate a collection of junk in the backseat and never break down. With each purchase, I have convinced myself that I was that much closer to the good life, as if the good life was something that a clever pro could market and a motivated consumer could buy.

When Jesus announced to the crowd that he would build his church upon Peter and give to Peter the keys to God's realm, Peter must have felt that he had fallen face forward into the good life. Can't you see Peter's chest swelling with pride too wonderful to disguise? He had left his livelihood to take on a new life with Jesus. He had left the simple comforts of home to take on a tough life on the road. He had left a familiar well-worn routine to take on the uncertainties of a whole new life. And, now, finally, the pay off comes as Jesus rewards him with his own set of keys. Keys to the kingdom. Ah, at last, the good life.

Then Jesus ruins the moment. He tells Peter and the other boys, "Look, the road to Jerusalem is filled with nails. They'll pierce me and put an end to me, but after three days God will reclaim my life." Peter takes Jesus aside and says, "Come to your senses, man. Don't you remember I just pronounced you the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God? These things don't happen to God; and God forbid, they must never happen to you." What goes unsaid is, "Because, of course, that would mean that they would also happen to someone who followed you. Someone like me."

Seemingly, Peter's brief taste of the good life came to an embarrassing halt when Jesus barked back at Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a scandal, a stumbling block, to me for you have set your mind not on divine things, but on human things." This is exactly the opposite of what Jesus had said to Peter after he made his great confession. Do you remember that from last week? Peter called Jesus the Christ and Jesus told Peter that that answer came from heaven not from a human brain. Now Peter wants to deny what Jesus has said and Jesus tells him that was the answer of a

human brain, not heaven. The rest of the air escapes from the balloon of the good life as Jesus goes on to say, "You want these keys? Then deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me. Those interested in saving their lives will lose them and those willing to lose their lives for my sake will find them."

Peter and the disciples are ready for a taste of what everyone else knows to be the good life. But Jesus gives them an ad hoc lecture in God's economic plan. As theology professor Tom Long says so well, "A life that is spent soothing the pain of the sick, caring for children in need, hammering nails in houses for those without shelter, sharing bread with the hungry, visiting those in prison, and denying oneself may seem like a squandered life in the economy of a self-centered age, but in the storehouse of heaven, it is a lavish treasure."

Some said then and some say now that God's economic plan just won't work. They say that people want to get rid of pain, not take it on. People want to accumulate assets, not give them away. People want to know their own minds, not bother trying to know the mind of Christ. With due respect to Jesus, they argue that the good life is a measure of what we have, how easily we can get what we want, and how seldom we are inconvenienced. They might never say this aloud, but they are confident that God's economic plan is destined for the same resting place as the Titanic. Listen to any of today's well-groomed and smooth talking prosperity preachers and you'll hear them denying God's economic plan and applauding Peter's idea of the good life when Peter corrects Jesus saying, "You just can't speak like this!" Maybe Peter and the prosperity preachers are the real wise ones. And Jesus is the starry-eyed economic optimist.

But I'd hold up a bit on jumping to that conclusion. I suggest that we don't give up on God's economic plan too soon. Notice that Peter never had any hope of understanding the good life until Jesus told him to get behind him. That's the only position from which you and I will ever learn about the good life that Jesus intends for us and models for us by standing behind Jesus, listening to him, watching his every move, and trusting in God's economic plan despite the most lively critics within and outside the church.

That brings me back to my parents. What they did not realize is that they taught me about the good life not by giving us a stockpile of presents, but by their generosity and willing self-sacrifice.

I learned about the good life first at home, but my education has been enriched in each church I have served. I have seen it in you. You have taught me much about the good life. If I start telling those stories, we will be forever. So let me point you to the best summary of the good life I can find. It is in our epistle reading today from Romans 12:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let me summarize it this way: Don't treat people according to what they deserve. Treat people according to what they need. That's what it means to deny yourself. That's what it means to take up your cross. That's what it means to follow Jesus. That's the good life. Amen, and Amen.