

Matthew 16:21-28 Christian Perspective

In my last semester of college I took an elective class in the business school called, “Christian Business Perspective.” All semester, the primary question was, “can a person be a Christian *and* participate in the business world at the same time?”

At the end of the class there was a vote and everyone said, “yes, it is possible,” all except for one person, a football player who weighed over 300 lbs., who raised his hand and said, “no, it is not possible.”

I did not think then or think now that one can’t be a Christian in a business climate characterized by ambition and greed, as a matter of fact I think we need more authentic Christianity in business than has been recently seen. But it is a good question.

One may well ask the question more generally, “Is it possible to be a Christian and live in this world, with all of its contradictions and distortions, with all its violence and excess?”

Last Sunday the Old Testament scripture was from the book of Exodus about Moses in the basket on the Nile River and Pharaoh’s daughter. This week the lectionary reading moves ahead to the story of Moses and the burning bush experience, where the prospective leader is found tending sheep in Midian,

and receives the call to return to Egypt, but not as a prince, rather as the liberator of an oppressed people.

In the lectionary there is always a gospel reading and one from the epistles, as well as a psalm. All summer the Sunday texts have been from the Book of Genesis and now Exodus, the Gospel of Matthew, and the Epistle to the Romans. It is like a trifecta with a psalm for good measure.

Sometimes there does not seem to be much in the way of a connection between the different texts, sometimes there is. This week, the reading in the Gospel is about the encounter between Jesus and his chief disciple Peter, just after Peter has stated straight out that Jesus is the expected Messiah.

There is a connection with the OT reading because in Exodus God has chosen Moses to be a leader and then has to get into an argument over what that means; and in the gospel, Jesus has named Simon, “Rock,” and given him the keys to the kingdom, and subsequently gets into an argument with him about what *that* means.

Peter

The primary concern for Peter is Jesus’ insistence that he is going to be killed by the religious leaders. Peter has a different perspective and strongly objects, believing in the success of Jesus’ movement and

telling Jesus it would never be allowed to happen. In turn, Jesus rebukes Peter with an even stronger reply,

“Get behind me Satan, you are a stumbling block to me, you do not have in mind the things of God, but human things.”

Then Jesus goes on to present a “lifestyle of the cross,” one of sacrifice. He says, “if anyone would come after me he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” He goes on, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”

This, “cross mentality,” is largely set against more widely accepted cultural norms that follow another logic that, “whoever seeks his life will find it, but whoever loses (sacrifices) his life . . . will simply lose it.” The general standard operating procedure across time and across all cultures runs counter to this gospel perspective.

Thomas Merton

I think of Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk of the WWII generation. Merton showed great promise as a writer back in the 1930’s who chose to give up a writing career to enter a monastery in Kentucky, where he lived out the rest of his life, rarely leaving the farm.

Thinking that writing would no longer be a part of his life, he was surprised when the abbot assigned him a two hour reprieve from the monastic routines to write. Either the Abbot realized Merton’s talent or was told by Merton’s friends. In any case, for twenty-seven years he wrote for two hours every day about contemplation, peace, equality, and prayer.

The reason I mention his story is to see the way he gave up his life of writing, characterized by ambition and desire for success and wealth, and went into a religious vocation in which he found writing as a calling, but not one driven by desire, rather service. Writing was infused with meaning and purpose.

Moses

Several features of the Moses story also fit this understanding of the things, but in a different way. His upbringing in Pharaoh’s household, his life in the midst of the trappings of power, his education; then the realization that he was an outsider who came from foreign population, revealed when he murdered the Egyptian master who was beating a couple of them; his escape to Midian where he became a shepherd, a profession that required him to care for and lead animals which are notorious for getting lost, a humble profession that required time alone in the wilderness where independence and trust had to be nurtured; all these combined to prepare him for the great task of liberating God’s people from bondage in Egypt.

All he needed was a reckoning in which he came to understand his calling. The burning bush was such a reckoning.

The burning bush has become a metaphor for that reckoning in all our lives when by Grace and In Christ, our lives are infused with a new perspective.

And he resisted it. The familiar conversation between Moses and the voice in the bush reveals the natural human reticence to accept the purpose for which their life has prepared them, as does Peter's opposition to the Jesus.

Personal Call

I am speaking now of my call to ministry. I did not so much have a "burning bush" experience like Moses, but rather just a realization that the vocational path that I had chosen was not meant for me. When I went off to college, I became a business major.

It is not that and the end of college I had a singular experience where I saw a vision of my life, one that led to a seminary. It is more accurate to say that the perspective of my life that led to seminary was already there, I was just in denial about it. I was resisting, like Moses did.

"Whoever seeks his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." I have never been able to explain what this means to my own satisfaction, but I have always felt that it sounded right.

For Moses, seeking his life led him to commit murder and flee to the wilderness in Midian tending sheep, and for Peter it led him to a naive belief in the earthy triumph of Jesus. For Merton it led to New York and a writing career and for me it led to business school.

While in every case God was able to redeem those experiences as preparation, but when the time came there was a confrontation with another reality, another perspective. Moses went to Egypt and Peter went to the cross; less consequentially, Merton went to Kentucky and even less, I went to seminary.

Sometimes a haphazard scattering of events may prepare us for some adventure, sometimes our vocation may not change, but will be given new meaning, and sometimes we may find ourselves jumping tracks. Regardless of how it works out, there is for each of us a way to be authentically Christian in this world.

Our perspective will be challenged. I believe we will find that the best things are not the result of our own ordering of life, but the discovery that our lives have been ordered for us and for our good, and for the world's good.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)