

Nov 9 – The Life of Jesus

Mark 8:34-38

Jesus portrays life as a series of choices. Are you going to follow him or your own interests? Are you willingly going to sacrifice for God and others or not? The writer of our study talks about these two roads as “Life Taking” and “Life Giving.” We need to understand that these choices are not a onetime deal but a continual challenge to faithfulness. Every day, in multiple ways, we have to set our feet on one of these paths. We do so by the choices we make.

First of all, there is the Life Taking Road. Now none of us would deliberately set out on such a destructive path. If the choice was that clear and succinct none of us would ever be tempted. But this is the path of the world’s values and because of that it is so easy for us to head down this road. In the beginning it isn’t even wrong to be on parts of this path, but embrace some of these values too closely and you get into trouble.

Let me give you an example from our author. He talks about self-preservation. Now we know it is necessary in a baby. They have to cry to let us know they are hungry, are in pain and need to be changed. In the beginning their world is only about their wants and needs, but as they grow they are to learn that other’s wants and needs are important too. Sometimes this all-about-self mentality remains, and when it does what was endearing as a baby becomes destructive as an adult.

“The problems begin when the self we are trying to preserve starts wandering away from those life-giving things that helped us thrive as infants. Some of those life-giving things--such as family and love--can remain throughout our lives; but other, life-taking things can crowd them out. In middle school, we define ourselves based on the insecure input of our peers and the warped input of the consumer culture. In young adult life, we define ourselves based on our (never quite good enough) physical attractiveness. In adult life we define ourselves based on our work and our need to be comfortable. We human beings tend to follow such paths to the extreme.”

This can lead to destructive addictions. It can cause us to become workaholics, destroying friendships as we seek to climb social or work ladders of success. In seeking popularity we can end up making life-style choices that we are not really comfortable with. The farther we go down any of these paths, the more we strive to justify why this behavior is acceptable. I have had many a conversation with people who want to prove that what they are doing is all right. I haven't even challenged them but my being a pastor makes them feel uncomfortable and so the conversations. I have even had people I have gotten to know in the community in other capacities break off relationships after learning I am a pastor because I made them feel bad. They say that they feel judged.

These life-taking roads ultimately lead to a shallow existence. Because it is not life giving it often hurts others. When we are focused on self and let the world's values of "If it feels good, do it," or "The one with the most toys wins," or "I'm number one", to dominate our lives and our relationships, it leads to our casting away people who get in our way. It causes hurt and though we might be successful for a time it leads to a place where we fear and distrust everyone else's motives because we know our own and believe others are acting from the same self-serving motives. So we end up alone, buying friendships through our money or position. I have seen it happen and these can end up being some of the loneliest people I know even though the world sees them as popular and successful.

In one small community there was a county commissioner. No one trusted him. All felt that he would say whatever the person talking to him wanted to hear. He was popular with the voters and we thought he was well liked. We were shocked when we learned he had taken his life. His final note talked about extreme loneliness. So the path of the world ultimately is life taking.

Let's move to the other path, the life-giving road. Jesus was clear that it won't be easy, at least in the beginning, to be on this path. He says, "all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them." He also talks about taking up your cross. The path of Christ is counter-cultural. It is a path that emphasizes sacrifice, giving, forgiveness and compassion amongst other things. In the short term

those things are hard. When we are around culturally driven people they often see our faith choices as things to exploit. We all have heard the stories of people using friendships to get ahead at work at the expense of another, or abusing one's willingness to forgive in a relationship. It feels at times like we are losing and sometimes in the short-run cultural views of things we are. But ultimately it is life giving.

Think about what happens when our lives are focused on life-giving choices. When we put family and friendship ahead of success our lives are so much fuller. There are numerous stories of men, in particular, who, in trying to get ahead, work long hours, weekends and never take vacations. They do it, they say for the family. And yes, the family benefits from the increased income in consuming more. They have a big home, the kids wear the trendiest clothes and they take vacations, without dad, to all the best places. But ultimately the children grow up really not knowing their fathers, or the marriage ends because it became meaningless. I have talked to children of those successful dads and they would have given it all up for more time with their fathers.

Think about how rich your life is when you let your faith values lead you. Yes, you sacrifice some time and perhaps some money but you also tell me how much you gain. The reason that the author calls this the life-giving path is because it builds us up and those around us. It deepens the relationships we have and the commitments we make. It bathes our choices in meaning for we do it in the name of Christ. In loving, caring and sharing in Jesus' name we may lose, according to the world but we gain in what is important.

As we move to the end of our lives these decisions give us the underpinnings we need when life is tough. We reach out to friends and family in trust and find them there to help us. How many times have you said or thought, "How could anyone deal with.... without faith." This is the acknowledgement that faith and the support we get from people matters. Taking this path will ultimately give us peace at the end of the road. I have had the privilege of being with many people as they near the end of their life journeys. Some face it with peace and confidence. They have lived lives of faith, believe in the promises of eternal life, are surrounded by loving family and friends and so do not fear. Others have come to the end of their days and in looking back are not happy with

the choices they have made. They are now afraid. That great big door called death is a step into a scary unknown. At that moment they sometimes are scrambling to try and find faith before it is too late. Others resign themselves to the fact that they have made their choices and so be it.

As I said at the beginning, we are presented with choices every day. We have to decide whether we will be focused on God or on self. You might be asked to forgive someone today; it is a choice. You might be asked to give a bit of your time. What will you do? See, there are lots of little decisions and the more aligned with God, surrendering our lives to walk with Christ, the better.