

St. Andrew's UMC
August 31st, 2008
Matthew 16:21-28
"Mind On Human Things?"

I remember reading a book whose author contended that Jesus had a death wish. I forget its title or the name of the author. The writer based his argument on the fact that Jesus told his disciples at least three times that he would be killed, and did not change the course to his destination, Jerusalem.

What pressing mission did he have to accomplish there? If he knew that there was a mortal danger waiting for him, why would Jesus insist on going to Jerusalem? Besides, the gospels report that the Pharisees had decided to destroy Jesus, when he meddled with the Pharisee's teachings. There are two major reasons that motivated the Pharisees.

The offense number 1: Jesus declared that the Sabbath is there for men, not the other way around, and therefore he is the Lord of the Sabbath. The offense number 2: Jesus then reinterpreted the teaching about what actually defiled a person. It was not what went into the mouth of the person, but what came out of the heart of the person that defiled. It meant that eating pork or eating with unwashed hands do not, according to Jesus, defile a person.

As if this was not enough, Jesus actually added to the list of his "deadly crimes" once he entered the temple: the temple cleansing, as we know it. Jesus overturned the money changer's tables, and drove out the merchants who sold the kosher animals for the sacrifices. That did not help the temple economy, for it is certain that the temple received a percentage of income from these merchants. Do you also suspect that Jesus had a death wish?

Maybe, Jesus actually had the death wish. See how he treated Peter, when he said what any decent person would: God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you! Jesus shot back: "Get behind me, Satan! Wow. Is that a thing to say to a person who is concerned with your welfare?

If Jesus is believed to have a death wish, just because he knowingly and insistently headed to Jerusalem, fully aware of the danger, then it raises a question: Do our soldiers have a death wish, for they volunteer to be sent to extreme harm's way? Don't they rather have the keen sense of the mission and the loyalty to their country that actually motivated them to volunteer?

The implication of this argument was that the Christianity is a religion based on an unfortunate and mistaken self-understanding of one individual. Maybe, God did not call Jesus to be his Son or the Messiah. Maybe, we should wait for the real messiah, as our Jewish brethren do. If Jesus had the death wish, Jesus died by mistake, and our sins would remain, and no one is saved in Jesus name.

What the author tried to dismiss was the sense of mission that Jesus might have realized, and portray him as one who self-appointed himself as the messiah, as if he suffered from the messianic complex. The reader was led to wonder, if Jesus was indeed suffering from misunderstanding of one's self.

The writer seemed to ignore that there are people who believe in a cause to the degree that they are willing to pay the ultimate price. I deemed that the book was a piece of liberal perspective taken to an absurd proportion. I remember having a great difficulty with the school of thought.

If Jesus had the death wish, why would he invite others to join him on the cross? I cannot imagine any one recruiting others by preaching death wish:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

Maybe the statement was not intended for recruitment, but discouragement. Then why would Jesus want to have 12 disciples around him in the first place?

It is very difficult to dismiss that Jesus was merely suffering from a messianic complex, for he fully understood the gravity of what he was doing. What will profit any one, if he or she gains the whole world, but forfeit his or her life, Jesus asked.

What will profit any immigrant to have five Seven-Eleven stores and a new house, if he would collapse today from exhaustion and heart failure? What will profit any working stiff to struggle hard to be promoted, only to succumb to the stress-induced acute infarction? On the hospital bed, what will they give in return for their life?

The answer is rather simple: they would all want their life back, if possible. They would realize, too late, what precious things they had ignored or given up, in order to gain what they wanted. They would want to attend the birthdays of the children they missed. They would want to have Sunday BBQs in the park with the family. They would just want to look at the sunset with the spouse leaning to each other. They would want to walk on the beach, listen to the crash of the waves, and feel the warmth of the sun and the gentle caress of the wind. Very few people think about their monthly bills or the next project in their deathbed.

Life is the most sacred and important thing, yet Jesus was planning to let go of that life, and even inviting others to do the same. No, actually, Jesus was telling his disciples that the only thing that can save a life is the life itself.

Nothing can bring the life back. You need to give up your life—that is, dedicate your life—in order to save your own life. And that was exactly what Jesus was prepared to do in Jerusalem. Only he was going to do it for others' lives.

Now we want to know why Jesus reacted with such violence to Peter's concerned words. Didn't Peter truly care for the welfare of Jesus? It is startling to note, however, that Matthew says that Peter "rebuked" Jesus. We are confused, why Matthew would describe Peter's action as a "rebuke." One would expect to see that Peter's words are of the caring nature, instead. The Matthew records in 20:17-25 an important clue to what motivated Peter to rebuke Jesus.

Right after Jesus had finished telling the disciples that he would be killed in Jerusalem one more time, the mother of John and Andrew came up to Jesus. She asked that Jesus let her sons sit at his right and left, in his kingdom. She meant the highest possible positions in the cabinet. It was a deft one-upmanship by a shrewd mother-turned-lobbyist, and that was not taken well by the rest of the disciples. Matthew reports their reaction: “When the ten heard it they were indignant at the two brothers.”

The disciples had been arguing who was the greatest among themselves (Mark 9: 33, 34). Jesus knew about it, but asked only at one occasion in Capernaum what they were discussing. The disciples had been taught that the kingdom of Heaven would come, and they thought it meant that Jesus would be the king. If Jesus was going to be the king, who is going to be at the top? They were preoccupied with that thought. No wonder, a few miracles escaped their notice. It is hard to be impressed with miracles of feeding the poor, when you are busy developing on your own career in the impending administration.

So each disciple had been vying for the powerful positions against one another, checking one another among themselves. It appears that John and Andrew were the smarter of the bunch, and found the advantage of having a lobbyist to plead their case. So they employed their mother to lobby for their cause.

If so, then, what Peter said was not really out of the pure concern for Jesus' welfare, but the concern for his own future career in the kingdom of Jesus. If Jesus is dead, all their investment of time and energy into being Jesus' disciples will be moot. Then they would have to go back to their humble origin: the fishing village and other sundry occupations. Therefore, Jesus must not die, period.

It may sound reasonable that Jesus reacted the way he did, now we have examined the context of Peter's statement. It was intolerable to Peter that his cash cow was preparing to get killed. Peter was trying to protect his investment, and did not care for the greater picture to which Jesus committed his life. To Jesus, that was satanic.

Setting one's mind on human things is a human thing to do. That is what a human being does. It is unreasonable to insist that being human is a satanic thing. How do we discern what makes setting our minds on the "human things" satanic? When the selfish interest interferes with, or obstructs, God's plan, it is satanic. Any temptation or stumbling block that hinders God's plan is satanic in nature.

The moment Peter put forward his selfish interest as a stumbling block against God's plan in Jesus, Peter became satanic. Because Jesus committed himself to God's mission to such a degree, he rejected Satan's use of his disciple as a temporary tool to weaken his commitment to God's plan. Jesus fully understood what the cost of his mission was, and he was committed to pay for it. His mind was set on the divine plan.

As precious as a life is, sometimes it is necessary to risk one's life to save another, to sacrifice one to save the rest. Life is a costly thing. I am sure that every parent here understands what that means, when it comes to the welfare of the children.

God's plan always aims to benefit human life. Because each life is so precious, God chose to sacrifice one for the benefit of the many. Jesus understood its benefit, and he gave up his own, so that that plan might be accomplished.

It is a divine thing to do, when we transform our selfish interests into the faithful obedience. That dedication, that obedience, is how we set our minds on divine things. Any time we seek to edify life according to God's plan, we do what is divine.

May your minds always dwell on the divine things.