

Life Worth Living 1: Wealth, Health and Happiness?

Mark 10:17-27 (Based on the book by Miroslav Volf) by Patty Friesen, (July 7/24)

A rich young ruler who was searching for a life worth living, asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers: You know the rules; follow them. The young man protests. He has followed the rules, but it still seems like there's something missing. Jesus lights up. He knows what the young man lacks: he has too much stuff. "You lack one thing; go. See what you own, and give the money to the poor and then come, follow me." When he heard this, the rich young man went away sad for he had many possessions.

This man wouldn't be sad if he didn't think Jesus was right. He wouldn't be sad if he weren't convinced that Jesus had what he wanted and that giving away his possessions was necessary for getting it. He walked away sad because he still couldn't imagine selling all he had, even though he was convinced that Jesus had offered the path to what he was after. From the point of view of the story, the rich young man has insight and understanding. He gets what Jesus is asking and why. He walks away sad because he can't act on his conviction to do it.

The gospel story of the rich young ruler is a summary of the Gospel - what Jesus requires of us. Jesus refers him to a source of life that can be tapped only when we give up planning our own life and become poor before God. "There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, and in the age to come, eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30)

This story takes on a particular challenge today when a rich Western society and church stand before the injustice of the international distribution of goods like the camel confronting the eye of the needle. The Gospel quiets the drive for more material and spiritual possessions not through the promise of more possessions but through a kind of wealth that is more than possession. It doesn't add heavenly value to this worldly property but creates a new justice in the relationship between rich and poor. The story of the rich young ruler presents a material and spiritual challenge to us all. It remains a thorn in our flesh, when our hearts depend on money, intellectual or material possessions or anything else that is not God. (Richard Rohr, p.142 Discovering the Enneagram)

In the book Life Worth Living, based on an ethics class at Yale University taught by three religion professors, they recount a young student who like many of her peers had come to Yale profoundly attached to external validation - top scores on exams, glowing comments on her essays, affirmation from peers and mentors alike. Through the Life Worth Living Course, she had come to see this parade of affirmation in a new light. She decided she didn't want to live for grades or external validation. She wanted to live for the intrinsic value of the work she was doing and the people she was doing it with. This insight had been life-giving for her.

However, when she got a disappointing grade on a paper for another course, she found herself walking around campus crying. Crying over a grade on a paper. She felt at war with herself. She knew a grade wasn't worthy of being the measure of her life. And yet she was unable to shake this deep feeling of shame and disappointment. This student had encountered a very real dynamic for any of us who want to change the way

we live. We may have come to some meaningful insights. Those insights may even have pointed the way to an entire vision of flourishing life but we ourselves are still very much as we were before. We cannot change without help from God. (P. 241-242)

A pharmacy in the US called Walgreens had the slogan - Walgreens - located at the corner of Healthy and Happy. Indeed the American Dream is framed as the pursuit of happiness. Most of us would love to live at the corner of Wealthy, Healthy and Happy and Long too. Because if we are healthy and happy - then a longer experience of both is better but we only want a long life if it is healthy and happy. Our oldest members John Bueckert and Jacob Friesen made it to over 100 years old. They epitomize long, healthy and happy. We need all three to have a life worth living - we think. No one wants a life that short, sickly and sad!

And yet I will tell three stories of lives that have been impactful *and* have been short, sad and sickly. The short lives of Joseph Hofer aged 23 years and Michael Hofer aged 24 years. The Hofer brothers were Hutterites from the Rockport Colony in South Dakota and were among four conscientious objectors from their colony who had been court-martialed and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment for refusing to be drafted in to the United States Army during World War I. After initially being sent to Fort Alcatraz for refusal to comply with military orders and discipline, Joseph and Michael were transferred to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where they both died within two weeks of their arrival. Their bodies were returned to their families in the military uniforms that they had refused to wear. They were buried at the Rockport Colony with the words Martyrs written on their tombstones. The death of the brothers contributed to the decision by Hutterites to begin emigrating to Canada in 1918 and in subsequent years.

Joseph and Michael didn't want a short life. If they had emigrated to Canada earlier, they likely would have lived for many more years but they saw that something else mattered more than the length of their lives - namely their commitment to their personal conscience and the larger faith practices of their Hutterite Anabaptist community.

A short and unhappy life. Abraham Lincoln suffered from crushing, persistent melancholy. From the time of his mother's death when he was nine, he would go through periods of deep depression. His friends worried that he might harm himself. By the time he was president, a profound sense of sadness had impressed itself on his whole character. One acquaintance remarked that "the melancholy seemed to roll from Lincoln's shoulders and drip from the ends of his fingers."

As president, Lincoln led the United States through the dreadful violence and death of the Civil War. The burden only intensified his unhappiness. "If there is a worse place than hell, I am in it," he lamented. And yet Lincoln chose that place. He took the burden on himself. Lincoln didn't seek out sadness. But he didn't run from it either, and he didn't let fear of it keep him from doing what he saw as his duty. What's more, Lincoln's sadness likely contributed to what was most admirable in his character. Knowing and feeling the tragedy of death, wrestling with a sadness that would never go away for good - all this equipped Lincoln to lead with gravity, persistence and significant compassion and honesty.

The short and sickly life of Simone Weil. Cynthia Wallace, professor of religious at St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan writes about the French Christian mystic Simone Weil who grew up in France with agnostic parents who were

ethnically Jewish. She and her brother didn't know they were Jewish until they went to school. But as Simone went to write about in notebooks and letters, Weil found herself attracted to Christianity starting in 1935 when she witnessed Portuguese villagers singing hymns. In 1937, she found herself compelled to pray in Assisi in the church where St. Francis had prayed. In 1938, during a devastating round of migraine headaches, a condition to which she was prone, she tried to identify the pain she was suffering with the passion of Christ. In this effort, she suddenly felt that Christ himself came down and took possession of her.

From that time on she became increasingly Christ-centered. She resumed her studies of philosophy, history and science, but now her angle of vision was training on the meaning of God's intervention in history through the Incarnation and the cross. She immersed herself in the New Attended Mass, studied the mystics and brought herself to the threshold of the Church while choosing not to be baptized.

These mystical experiences of Christ, changed her vision of the world, but they did not change her commitment to political thinking and action. Indeed, her mystical experience in 1938 did nothing to lessen her political concern, but if anything intensified it during the rise of Hitler's threat in France. She didn't want to leave France but did so in 1942 with her parents to come to the United States. Eager to return to help resist Hitler, she returned to London in 1943 where she contracted tuberculosis and died at the age of 34. Simone Weil is one of the most compelling religious figures of our century. She represents a type of non-institutional devotion to God, while engaged in the pathos of the human condition and particular horrors of the Second World War. (Wallace, p. 8 *The Literary Afterlives of Simone Weil*)

Maybe a life worth living isn't about its length or its wealth or its health or its happiness after all. The lives of Joseph and Michael Hofer, Abraham Lincoln and Simone Weil suggest that there are other things worth living for, even if they cost you your health, your happiness or even your life. It appears as if a meaningful, impactful life or a life worth living is comprised not just our own individual pursuits but a life lived in responsibility to God and others.

Oooo, we may chafe at responsibility and commitment - sacrificing something of our own needs for someone else? And yet - that kind of giving up of our own best interest may be the very thing that is in our best interest because it gives us something more than health, wealth and happiness - it gives us purpose and meaning - something that blesses our lives more greatly than a new car. In First Nations worldview - no one lives alone to their own best interest. Each one takes up a bundle to carry on shoulders or back - whether that bundle is a child or an elder or wood for fires - a bundle is our individual responsibility for the good of all.

Entering into a life worth living is really hard. How hard? Jesus says impossible, like a camel going through the eye of a needle. It would take divine intervention for us to live the sort of lives truly worthy of our shared humanity. But Jesus believes that sort of divine intervention is available. The Christian claim is that Jesus is that divine intervention for a meaningful life. All that needs to be done is admit we can't get there on our own. We have to get rid of all that stands in the way and then come and follow Jesus. Let him do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Let us pray...Generous God, you gave us life such as it is; sometimes long, healthy and happy and sometimes short, sickly and sad. We present ourselves; our

work and play, our joys and sorrows, our thoughts and deeds, needs and resources to be used by you for the sake of all people everywhere through Jesus Christ. Amen.