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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/1/2015, The Second Sunday in Lent  
Mark 8:31-38

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>36</sup>For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? (Mark 8:36, KJV)<sup>1</sup>

## THE SOUL

Earlier this past week, in my first notes to Parish Secretary Karen Rombey about today's worship folder, I dutifully used the *New Revised Standard Version* translation of our Gospel text. That modern version of my verse goes this way:

For what will it profit *them* to gain the whole world and forfeit their *life*? (Mark 8:36, NRSV)

This modern translation substitutes the pronoun "them" for the old pronoun "man" and it substitutes the word "life" for the old word "soul."

I realize that as time goes by, it becomes increasingly necessary to forsake the word "man" when referring to humanity and to use the more inclusive word "them." I regret that in some measure because the old word "man" carries a Biblical richness of meaning that is not quite captured by the word "them." Maybe some other day, I will talk about that some more.

For this sermon, my concern is not with the word "man" but with the word "soul." In the end, I just could not bring myself to go with the modern translation "life," though I acknowledge that the word "life" is a proper translation of the underlying Greek word ψυχήν (*psuche*). But it is just too weak for the subject that lies before us. We are talking not just of our "life" but of our "soul."

A soul is worth ten thousand worlds. A soul is a life considered through the lens of eternity. A soul is a moral being meant by our Maker for everlasting life. Jesus is not talking about our threescore and ten years, but rather about our eternal destiny.

Or, at least, that is how this old-fashioned preacher sees things.

Not everybody does. Once upon a time I told a colleague that I felt I *had to* conduct my ministry in such-and-such a way because it would not be long before I must kneel before Jesus and give an account of my ministry for the souls entrusted to me. I said this twice to this fellow, on two different occasions. And each time he looked at me as if I were hopelessly out-of-date, as if he could hardly believe that I

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was inspired by a sermon of Charles Spurgeon called "Profit and Loss," which he preached back in 1856, though, as always, I have to develop his idea in my own way.

would live by such archaic notions as “kneeling before Jesus” and giving an account of the “souls” entrusted to me. Well, who knows what he was really thinking? And he was a nice man in any case. Maybe I am simply wrong here in preferring the old King James translation of our text. But if so, if I should use the modern word “life” instead of the old word “soul,” then I think no harm is done in this particular sermon. For if we keep an eye on our “soul,” we will thereby also keep an eye on our “life.” So, again, here is my text for this morning:

<sup>36</sup>For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain *the whole world*, and lose his own soul? (Mark 8:36, KJV)

## THE WHOLE WORLD

Hmmm. The “whole world.” Gaining the whole world. That would be sweet! Right?

Maybe not.

You and I might know of extraordinary apartments in our extraordinary town, in which the owners have none of the worries that many Americans have. They do not need to worry about paying the bills, sending their children to the best of colleges, receiving the best of medical care, owning great cars (Mustangs and Jeeps and so forth), going on great vacations, eating rich food, drinking whatever and however much they want. All of that is available to them. And yet the question remains and is inescapable for each of us: What are we *doing* in our apartments, how are we using our time, how are we growing in virtue? Or are we like the Prodigal Son “wasting our substance in riotous living”? I think we all know that it is possible to have “the whole world,” but to be miserable nonetheless because we have not formed in ourselves the virtues and the holy habits that are appropriate to the opportunities granted to us.

Compared to multitudes of poor people in this world, many Americans have “the whole world” at our command when it comes to food. But this does not profit us if we have not in some measure trained ourselves in righteousness. Our bodies become sluggish, our minds become sleepy, our blood vessels become narrowed, and our imaginations lose their feel for the plight of the poor. If we gain the whole world when it comes to food, but have not discipline, then we will never know the truth of the lovely saying from ancient times: The best sauce for our meal is hunger.

And suppose we *have* developed the virtues and holy habits appropriate for the opportunities we have? Still, gaining the “whole world” means gaining an awful lot of responsibility for the welfare of that world. It could well mean many sleepless nights. In fact, I don’t see how we could avoid that — not if we have a conscience about the souls entrusted to us.

I wish he hadn’t done it — I wish that Pope Benedict XVI had not retired from his ministry — and yet I cannot blame him for it. I can well understand that it

could nice to trade rule over the whole world for a quiet peasant's cabin near a lake with some good fishing.

And look at our poor Presidents — Democrat and Republican alike: they all seem to get grey hair and age right before our eyes. In a sense, they have gained the whole world. But in another sense, they have gained great responsibilities that could wear them out. It is quite literally true what Jesus said:

...to whom much is given, of him will much be required...  
(Luke 12:48, RSV)

By tradition the author of the Old Testament book Ecclesiastes is King Solomon of old. If ever there was a king who had gained the “whole world,” he would be the man. He had wealth and honor and wisdom aplenty to rule his vast kingdom. The Lord was with him:

<sup>12</sup>...lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. <sup>13</sup>And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days. (1 Kings 3:12-13, KJV)

But in the book of Ecclesiastes, this great King of Israel testifies that all of his prosperity and wisdom do not really amount to much — only a mere striving after the wind:

<sup>9</sup>So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. <sup>10</sup>And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. [which, I note, is a very nice circumstance: when we can toil and find pleasure and reward in our toil. But look at what follows:] <sup>11</sup>Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:9-11, RSV)

Perhaps the reason for this king's disappointment can be found in a couple verses from Ecclesiastes Chapter 1:

<sup>14</sup>I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. <sup>15</sup>That which is

crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered. (Ecclesiastes 1:14-15, KJV)

## JESUS

Except that I know Someone who *can* make that which is crooked straight and who can make up that which is wanting. You know him too. I mean our Lord and Saviour Jesus of Nazareth. Let me boast of him.

In the wilderness, right after his baptism, Jesus was tempted of the devil. The third of those temptations, as St. Matthew tells the story, is the one where the devil takes the gloves off and issues a straight appeal to greed:

<sup>8</sup>Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; <sup>9</sup>And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. <sup>10</sup>Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. <sup>11</sup>Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him. (Matthew 4:8-11, KJV)

For many a man, many a woman, the offer of the whole world and all its glory is a deceptive and finally disappointing offer. We are led to think that if we go to such-and-such schools, enter such-and-such profession, and make all the right moves, we will prosper. Maybe yes, maybe no. But for Jesus, he was offered the real thing. He could indeed have had all the glory and authority in the world, for St. Luke tells us that the devil claimed to have authority over such matters:

<sup>5</sup>And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said unto him, All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. (Luke 4:5-6, KJV)

Jesus did not deny the devil's claim here. He simply declined the offer. So, Jesus *could have had* the whole world, but he declined it. Why? Because your soul was at stake. I do not mean anything so meager as your "life." I mean your soul — your dignity and destiny for everlasting life with God.

<sup>36</sup>For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? (Mark 8:36, KJV)

For Jesus in his wilderness temptation, the searching question seemed to go like this:

For what shall it profit me if I should gain the whole world,  
but Gregory should lose his own soul?

Now put your own name in there:

For what shall it profit me if I should gain the whole world,  
but [your name] should lose his own soul, should lose her  
own soul?

So, Jesus declined the glory and authority over all the world. He declined for your sake and for mine. And in this manner, he gave you and me hope of heaven and eternal life.

Now, this same Jesus turns to us and asks us to make the same choice he did: Do not surrender your soul for trinkets. Indeed, do not surrender your soul for the whole world. Such a trade would be an unprofitable one for us.

For you see, it is not just our lives that are at stake. So are the lives of our children, our neighbors, and our world. When Jesus calls us to take up the cross and follow him, he therefore invites us to join him in laboring on behalf of this world:

<sup>34</sup>And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Mark 8:34, RSV)

Whatever hardship befalls us, whatever discipline is necessary, whatever sacrifice is involved in being true to Jesus, let us accept it. Let us accept it for the sake of our souls and for the sake of our neighbors who are bound to benefit from our taking up our cross and following Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.