

First Congregational Church of Westfield  
It Don't Mean a Thing  
Mark 8: 34-36  
February 28, 2021  
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*Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their own soul?" – Mark 8: 34-36*

I had a teacher once who really made an impression on me. One of the most profound things he said (and he said many) was the following: "Most people are eating the menu in life instead of the meal." Think about that for a minute. COVID restrictions are lifted. Your favorite restaurant is open for business. You've waited a long time for this. You make your reservations and order your meal, and instead of the food you've eagerly anticipated, the waiter brings you more menus. "Safer," he says. "How about some lovely seasonings, a fine rub or some flaky sea salt, fresh ground pepper?" You are incredulous. Seasoning? How 'bout some real food? No can do, replies your waiter.

Ridiculous, of course. But if you really think about it, a lot of times we eat without really tasting our food. Many times, we drive somewhere and we don't even remember the route we took. We just got there somehow. Our Scripture this morning says, "What does it profit someone to gain the whole world if (in the process) they lose their soul?" That's the one thing I want to focus on with you today. What if you have the car, the house, the girl, the guy? What if you accomplish everything you dreamed of when you were young? What about all those degrees? Those awards? Those accolades, those wonderful trips you took? Jesus says, You can have all that but if you don't have God, it don't mean a thing. God might be another word for mindfulness, awareness. But mainly, I believe God is another word for aliveness.

You may have heard the story of St. Francis and the almond tree. Francis referred to all creation as brother or sister. The legend goes that St. Francis approached the almond tree and said, "Brother Almond, speak to me of God." And the almond tree burst into bloom. Aliveness is what is available when one walks and talks with the Savior. There's no way to stay angry, to feel abandoned, to blame everyone else for your troubles, or to seek revenge (as opposed to justice) if your connection with God is alive and vibrating. All the accomplishments, riches, successes of the world? They don't mean a thing. Might as well eat the menu.

When my son was little, he dreamed of going to Disneyworld. I told him (without much success), "Disneyworld won't make you happy. You can be in Disneyworld and be miserable." No way, surprise, surprise, responded my son. Disneyworld was a magical place. You had to be happy there all of the time. And Disneyworld was a magical place. When we finally made it to that magical place, one of the three or four days we had there, my son got into a nasty mood. I couldn't resist the temptation to remind him, that it was true. You can be anywhere at all, and

be miserable. And of course, the reverse is true. You can be anywhere at all and be happy. God is the beauty of the world and all creation. God is the peace that passes all understanding. God is the innocence of a child. God is. But what casts a shadow on that peace, that happiness, that beauty, is the decision (conscious or unconscious) to go it alone. When we decide that power is more important than truth, riches are more important than integrity, and comfort is more important than a clean conscience. Power. Riches. Comfort. Status. Dominance. Fame. Position. Without this aliveness, the almond tree withers. There's no spring in our hearts, though springtime may be all around us. There's no spring in our steps because lies and arrogance, deceit and cynicism weigh us down. It don't mean a thing, none of it. It's truly meaningless and empty, and worse, we are dead inside. This is the promise of Lent, the forty days of reflection, self-examination, confession, reconciliation with our neighbor, our family member, ourselves and our true calling as disciples. Without this, life becomes dull and love eludes us. Not the love of attachment and automaticity. We are all attached to some people and to many things. We say we love them and we do. But is this feeling alive, real, in the moment? Is there joy when you look inside? Guess what? That is not because of anything outside of yourself. That is because of God.

Lay down your life, says Jesus. That doesn't mean forget about your hopes and dreams. That doesn't mean disregard your talents, your gifts, your so-called "favorite things." It means have perspective. It means remember, remember, remember, who you are and whose you are. It means take the time to discipline yourself to understand and actually live the truth of our faith, as best we can. Because God knows you are human. God knows you are a knucklehead. God forgives and God considers you as beautiful and precious as the lilies of the field that we bring into God's house at Easter. God never turns away from us. It's the other way around. We just need to simply get that without God in our hearts and minds, nothing means anything. God is the swing, the sheen, the radiance that makes everything come alive. It's the sun shining through the clouds that lights up the trees. We may think that gaining the whole world is a wonderful opportunity that is worth absolutely anything that we have to do or say in order to maintain our power, our position, our whatever you can think of, fill in the blank. But Jesus reminds us, leave your worries about your small life behind and follow him to the cross. It seems formidable, scary, non-sensical, and maybe impossible. But there is life there. Joy beyond measure. It's the paradox of the ages. Lose that old life. Gain eternal aliveness. If your heart is responding to his message today, put your hand on your heart, close your eyes, and say to God in earnestness and faith, I'll go with you, God. I'll go with you, with you, all the way...