

One lazy summer morning when I was in high school, the doorbell rang, jarring me from my sleep. Shuffling to the door, I peeked out the window to find a tiny, dapper man dressed in a full three-piece suit and fedora, despite the July heat. Curious, I opened the door a crack.

“Hello?” I said, as he swept his fedora from his head and made a small bow.

“Why, hello young lady. How would you like to have your very own tiger in heaven someday?”

This was not what I had expected.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“How would you like to have your very own tiger someday? Or perhaps a lion – all tame of course. When the Savior returns, you can have your pick.”

What followed was a long and confusing conversation about how this man believed that Jesus Christ was to return to earth, and that all true believers would be granted a place in that Eden-like heaven that Jesus would bring – the Kingdom of God, returned to Paradise before the fall. In that Paradise, I could have my very own zoo if I pleased, since Isaiah assured us that the wolf would dwell with the lamb, and a child would lead them all.

Even as a high-school student, I did not share his interpretation of heaven, and I told him so. As I argued, he began to sweat through

his jacket; finally, when I suggested it might be time to agree to disagree, he replied:

“Well, perhaps if I send around one of the ladies from our church, you might change your mind?”

Needless to say, I never saw him again.

What this man was selling was a one-time bargain, with no strings attached: just as surely as an infomercial host describes the virtues of any product which is available for a limited time only, order in the next 30 minutes and we’ll throw in an extra, \$50 product for only \$19.99, this man was selling me heaven. He wanted me to envision it, to feel the fur of my pet lion, and to commit myself to his glamorous product – a glorious time-share in a mansion in heaven, built just for me. He banked on my desire to ensure myself a place in this future paradise.

What is it, then, that Jesus is selling in today’s Gospel? Is he describing the same place as the door-to-door evangelist?

“Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

My life, said the man on the doorstep, could be ensured if I accepted Jesus in a specific way – because of Jesus’ payment, said this man, my life would go on in bigger and better ways in the paradise he described to me. Perhaps so.

The idea of Jesus’ suffering and crucifixion is what trips Peter up – while Peter is the one who first recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, he cannot fathom the amount of pain Jesus must endure in order to affect salvation. Peter can understand how Jesus might save the lives of others, but cannot accept that suffering must be necessary, that Jesus will lose his life for our sake.

But today, the bulk of what Jesus is telling about is not about death, but rather about life - our life, rather than being a product to be squirreled away, in order to be enhanced in the coming kingdom; rather than being an end goal, our life is the currency in which we deal.

What do I mean by that? Our life is the currency in which we deal?

Listen again to Jesus’ words: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” By our life, Jesus says, we purchase life itself. What is that life which we will gain? Not our own individual life, but rather the life of the gospel, the very life of

Jesus Christ, which we will find. Put another way: when we give our life, when we share our life for Jesus' sake, in order to bring about the Gospel, we are building on a sure foundation.

I think that, like Peter, we have become so hung up in the language of violent sacrifice that we fail to realize that it is not the sacrifice of our life which is being demanded – that sacrifice has been made in full already. Rather, it is the giving of our lives – the self-giving that Jesus demonstrated in all of his ministry – that Jesus is asking of us. “Follow me,” he says, “follow me in giving of yourselves for the sake of others.”

In the classic movie, ‘It’s a Wonderful Life,’ we are told the story of one man who gives his life to others for the sake of Gospel values. George Bailey, a talented and ambitious young man, trades in his dreams of fame and fortune in order to send his brother off to college, and then again in order to keep the family Savings and Loan afloat. During a panicked run on the banks, George is confronted by an angry and frightened crowd, demanding to have their money back. Over George’s shoulder hangs a large banner, proclaiming ‘Own Your Own Home!’ A man named Charlie confronts George, pleading:

“Tell us about our money, George? Where's our money?”

George responds, saying: “Now, please! Now, wait a minute! Listen

to me! Now, you're thinking about a building and loan all wrong. Your money's not here! Your money's in people's houses! In the Kennedy house, and the MacClaren house, and in your house, and a hundred others.”

This is the essence of Jesus’ message today: your money, your life, it’s not sitting in a vault somewhere. Our life, the Christian life, is a life made to be given away – to be lost – for the sake of the Gospel. Our life is in his life, and her life, and her life – invested in the lives of friends and strangers. We are meant not to build our own mansions in heaven, but rather to build for the sake of others, on the firm foundation of faith played out here on earth.

That is what we are doing here at St. Timothy’s, building for the sake of others. In our ministry fair today, we implicitly answer Jesus’ question to his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus is the Messiah who healed, and brought salvation; the Teacher who patiently described the Kingdom; the Liberator, who cared for the poor and oppressed; the one who Served by feeding the hungry.

Every time we participate in ministries like these, we proclaim by the giving of our lives, by these life-giving ministries, that Jesus is the one for whom we give our lives. May God bless us as we seek to serve others, in following Jesus faithfully towards a future unseen.

Amen.