

“The Good Life”
Mark 8:31-37
15th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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Mary Louise Kelly, a reporter for NPR,
wrote a memoir this past year.

It’s about her eldest son’s last year of high school.
The title of her memoir is: “It. Goes. So. Fast.”

Any of you with high school seniors recognize that feeling?

One day, while she and her son are on a college tour, she had a thought that I imagine is common with many parents these days:

“Good Lord, these poor kids...[there’s so much pressure]...it’s such a treadmill...”

Just enjoy this moment [she wants to say to her son].
Stop thinking about the next step, and the one after that.”

Then she writes:

“I am admittedly lousy at heeding this advice myself...”

“There is a relentless quality to ambition. George Saunders captures it beautifully in his book, *Congratulations, By the Way*.

“You do well in high school,” he writes, “in the hopes of getting into a good college, so you can do well in the good college, in the hopes of getting a good job, so you can do well in the good job...”

“...there’s the very real danger that ‘succeeding’ will take up your whole life, while the big questions go untended.”¹

Have you ever felt that way before?

That it’s so easy to get caught up in success, to watch your children get caught up in trying to succeed, but you wonder if you’re instilling the right values in them, or chasing the right goals yourself?

The columnist David Brooks wrote an entire book about this subject a number of years ago. In that book, he contrasted what he calls the “resume virtues” with the “eulogy virtues”...

“The resume virtues are the...skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They’re the virtues that get talked about at your funeral...whether you are kind, brave, honest...what kind of relationships you formed.”

Brooks confesses that he has spent more time in his life thinking about the resume virtues, and goes on to say:

“...like many people these days, I have lived a life of vague moral aspiration—vaguely wanting to be good, vaguely want to serve some larger purpose, while lacking a concrete moral vocabulary...[lacking] a clear knowledge of how character is developed and depth is achieved.”²

Our topic this morning is “The Good Life”...

¹ Mary Louise Kelly, *It Goes So Fast.*, New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2023.

² David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, New York: Random House, 2015.

What do Presbyterians believe about what it means to live a good life?

It may feel like a nebulous question, or perhaps an impossible question, but it's still an important question.

- After all, Presbyterians do NOT believe that the good life is about building a bigger bank account or a nicer home or being able to say that such and such prestigious college is where you went to school.
- And we are NOT Christians who believe in the prosperity gospel, that God blesses the faithful with wealth and health as God's reward for good behavior.

So where does that leave us?

Is there a common moral vocabulary for how we describe what a good life looks like?

Of course, this is not a new question.

It's an age-old question.

According to our text for today, the disciple Simon Peter was also concerned with this question.

Mark writes:

Then he [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed...

And Peter thinks to himself:

Jesus...have you lost your mind?

What is good about THAT KIND of life??!!

So...

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

And you recall how Jesus responds to Peter, right?

Jesus takes Peter asides and puts on his pastoral care hat and listens to Peter's concerns...no.

Jesus THUNDERS back at Peter:

“Get behind me, Satan!”

It's almost like Peter struck a nerve.

In fact, I think he did strike a nerve.

I think there was a part of Jesus that LIKED what Peter was saying.

You see, Peter had a pretty good argument here about the good life: Think of all the people you can help *if you stay alive, Jesus.*

So many more will be healed.

So many more will be taught.

So many more will be fed.

There's no need to stir the pot.

There's no need to rile the authorities.

There's no need to get yourself killed.

Just keep living a good life...

The theologian Miroslav Volf puts a modern-day spin on Peter's proposal in his recent book, *Life Worth Living*.

He calls it the Walgreens vision of a good life.
 Do you remember the old Walgreens slogan?
 “Walgreens—at the corner of happy and healthy.”

Volf writes:

“Many of us would say that’s where the good life is found...the good life is happy and healthy. And long...Long, happy, healthy: it’s a...modern vision of a life worth living.”³

Not that there’s anything wrong with happy,
 and goodness knows, the gift of good health
 is one every family and person in this room knows
 we should never take for granted.

The problem with the Walgreens vision is not that it’s bad or evil.
 The problem is that it doesn’t sound like Jesus.

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

THAT is Jesus’ vision of the good life!

“For 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.”

According to Jesus, the good life is not about success.
 It’s about sacrifice.
 It’s about the cross that Jesus asks each of us to carry.

³ Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most*, The Open Field/A Penguin Life Book, 2023.

A number of years ago, I read a story about Dr. Matthew Lukwiya.

Dr. Matthew was the medical superintendent of St. Mary's Hospital in Uganda.

He was a home-grown hero.
A born-again Christian.
And a person of substantial courage.

On one occasion, rebels came to the hospital. They wanted to kidnap some nuns. But Dr. Matthew volunteered to go in their place, and for one week he wandered around in the bush with the rebels, held at gunpoint, until they let him go.

In the fall of 2000, Dr. Matthew was away on leave when a mysterious disease started killing the hospital patients and staff.

He was called and came at once.
The disease turned out to be the deadly Ebola virus, which spreads through something as simple as a cough or a sneeze.

Dr. Matthew told his staff to think with their heads and not their hearts. They were to wear protection every time they came in contact with an infected or potentially infected patient.

In the end, Dr. Matthew's work was nothing short of miraculous.
The virus was contained.
The epidemic ended.
Hundreds if not thousands of lives were saved.

But Dr. Matthew didn't always heed his own advice.

On one occasion, he failed to wear a protective face shield.
And a short time later, he contracted Ebola and died...

“We should tell everyone the story of Dr. Matthew,” said one of his friends, and I agree.

But it’s a complicated story, isn’t it?
It’s the story of a good life.
And a courageous life.

And it’s also the story of someone whose devotion to the cross of Christ was a very costly thing:

leaving his wife without a husband,
his children without their father,
and his hospital without its leader.⁴

Someone who was willing to carry that cross to a place and a distance and an extreme that—on any given day—
I would be scared to go.

Do you see the dilemma here?

On the one hand, there’s nothing wrong with wanting our children to be happy, nothing wrong with wanting our families to be healthy.

But the question for the follower of Jesus is this:
Is healthy and happy all that Jesus asks of us?

When Jesus talks about the cross, he’s talking about COURAGE.

Whether it’s physical courage or emotional courage or moral courage or spiritual courage...he’s talking about taking steps with our life that we might be scared to take, steps that are not about us but about

⁴ Blaine Harden, “Dr. Matthew’s Passion,” *The New York Times*, February 18, 2001.

someone else...he's talking about intentional sacrifice for the sake of another.

He's talking about doing it—not on a one-time basis.
But on a daily basis...

Of course, courage comes in many forms.

The story is told of a widow and a widower.

They had known one another for a number of years, living in the same retirement community.

One evening there was a community supper in the big activity center where they lived. These two were at the same table, across from one another. As the meal went on, he made a few admiring glances at her and finally gathered up his courage to ask her, "Will you marry me?"

After a few seconds of careful consideration, she answered. "Yes, Yes, I will."

The meal ended and with a few more pleasant exchanges, they went to their respective places. Next morning, he was troubled. Did she say 'yes' or did she say 'no'?

He couldn't remember. Try as he would, he just could not recall.
Not even a faint memory.

With trepidation, he summoned his courage once again and went to the telephone and called her.

First, he explained to her that he didn't remember as well as he used to. Then he reviewed the lovely evening from the night before. As

he gained a little more confidence, he said, "When I asked if you would marry me, did you say 'Yes' or did you say 'No'?"

He was delighted to hear her say, "Why, I said, 'Yes, yes I will' and I meant it with all my heart."

Then she continued, "And I am so glad that you called, because when I woke up this morning, I couldn't remember who had asked me."⁵

That's one way to think about courage.
But we see other examples along the way, don't we?

That's why I look forward to Sunday mornings with you.

In other words, the ways that each of you already carry a cross faithfully—it's having an impact beyond what you might ever know.

When I look out at all of you, I see....

- Presbyterians who give sacrificially from their income.
- Fellow pilgrims who take much more time than I do to volunteer in our community.
- Faithful Christians who are committed to being present for one another when your brother or sister in Christ is suffering.
- Children of God whose courage in the midst of grief and loss is astounding—in fact, your faith has given me courage to face some of my own fears.

⁵ Found at the website <http://www.jokebuddha.com/Courage>.

Have you ever known someone like that?

Someone whose example of the good life had an impact on you,
and shaped you more profoundly than that person ever knew?

I'm thinking of a member of my former churches, a wonderful man named Jim.

He helped raise a beautiful family,
was extraordinarily smart,
successful at his work,
and was always volunteering at the church,
serving on the Session, a regular greeter on Sunday
mornings...

During the time that I was there at that church, there was another man named Brian. Brian would sometimes come to worship with us. I don't know where Brian lived, I don't know if he had a home.

I do know that Brian was plagued by mental illness. I don't know what it was, but you could sometimes see him out on the church lawn talking to himself, or to some other imaginary person.

He would run back and forth on the church lawn.
He had a hook instead of a hand.

It startled people. It scared some people.
Some people in the church were wary of him, stayed away from Brian at all costs.

But not Jim.
Jim made a point of befriending him.

In fact, on one occasion, Jim decided to take Brian out to a pricey Dallas restaurant for lunch. Later, Jim said that may have been a mistake, because while Brian wasn't always in his right mind, he knew enough at that lunch to order the five most expensive dishes on the menu that day...

Well, after I left that church, Brian died unexpectedly.

Not many people came to Brian's funeral.
There wasn't any family.
Just a couple clergy were there.
And Jim. Jim was at the funeral too.

Now why was Jim there?
Because he was a nice guy? Yes.
Because he was Brian's friend? That too.

But I submit to you that Jim was there because he had carried Brian's cross... he did for Brian what no one else really wanted to do.

Now I realize that you didn't know Jim.
But I suspect you know someone.

Someone who reminds you,
every time you think of this person,
THIS is what it means to live a good life.

The next time you're overwhelmed
by the demands that life is placing on you,
or you're afraid of what the future holds,
or you're confused about a decision you have to make,
or you just feel yourself start to DRIFT...

I hope you think of that person.

Remember the difference that person made in your life.
And remember who helped them do it.

They did not live a good life all on their own.
That's not what Presbyterians believe.
They did it by the grace of the risen Christ.

Christ was there, working through that person, when that person
touched and shaped your life.

And the good news today is—
whether you know or not,
whether you can see it or not,
whether you believe it or not...

Christ is doing—right now—
the very same thing through you.

Amen.