

## The Cross of Honesty

The Gospel of Mark gives pride of place to this morning's reading, where Jesus tell his disciples, not to set their minds on human things, but on divine things, where Jesus says:

“If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life ... for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

These words are at the center point of Mark in Chapter 8 of it's 16 Chapters. They are at what we call “*the hinge*”, where the first half of the story which deals with Jesus's ministry in the countryside meets with the second half, which turns to Jesus's journey to the cross. It is also the place where the Gospel switches between being a story about how God freely gives us what we need for our salvation and what is required of us in order to truly receive it.

Salvation in the Gospels comes in two parts. There is the shallower understanding, where we say to ourselves, “Look at all God has done for me. I'll just cash in on it and enjoy it personally.” It is a kind of half-way salvation, where our concern remains basically for ourselves.

And then, there is a part two, which is the fulfillment of this half-way salvation. And this comes to us when we follow Jesus toward Jerusalem and come to a deeper recognition of his true spirit, by taking on the reality of suffering and death with him; where we too deny ourselves in order to give life to others, even giving up our lives to a world that is willing to put us to death in return.

So at this “hinge” in the Gospel, Jesus gives us an ultimatum: hang on to your earthly way (your half a life, which isn’t really life) and die **or** follow me for the sake of the good news and live. It’s a take it or leave it moment.

So, this morning I’d like to think about this earthly way of living for ourselves that Jesus wants us to lose, for the sake of the divine life Jesus calls us to? What exactly are we freeing ourselves from.

### **Honest Weights and Measures**

I think you could think about this in several ways. But what I’d like to suggest to you this morning is that the divine life is a life that of disciplined honesty and that the “earthly” life we must lose is a life centered on self-preservation that relies on dishonesty. And I’d like to draw on a simple example.

One of the things I like about the Bible is the way it contains simple situations that make it possible to easily understand things that seem way to big and complicated to face. And that is the case with the reading you just heard from the Old Testament.

It describes two ways in which a simple farmer could earn his livelihood, one that is rooted in honesty and the other in dishonesty. The reading is very short, so let me read it again:

<sup>13</sup> Do not have two differing weights in your bag—one heavy, one light. <sup>14</sup> Do not have two differing measures in your house—one large, one small. <sup>15</sup> You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. <sup>16</sup> For the LORD your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly.

Think about this passage. When the farmer measures out his grain on a scale for sale to his customers, he can do everything using one set of accurate weights. Or, he can keep a phony set that allows him to deceive his customers into thinking they are getting the agreed on amount, when they are really getting less.

The farmer who uses the approved set of weights at all times, according to these verses, will live long in the land God has given him. He behaves honestly and gets what is appropriate. The opposite is true for the one

who uses false weights to further increase his gain dishonestly. Things will not work out for him.

But is that really how things turn out in the “real” world? If you look at things objectively, it seems as though the opposite is true. The people who end up being the wealthiest and the people who have access to the “good life” are very often the people who are the most successful at being dishonest, the people who use phony weights and measures to suck you into thinking they are dealing with you honestly, when they aren’t.

So, if cheating like this will get you access to the good life, and being honest and sticking only to the correct set of weights will actually be a disadvantage to you, then why not join the club and cheat? It’s a very seductive argument.

But then think of the overall consequences of the decision to rely on false weights and measures, especially when it is no longer just the few who are using them. It seems to me that this decision to cheat, made over and over again across time has been the simple cause of untold misery, all of it self-inflicted.

I'm not an economist, but my guess is that this basic decision to use false weights and measures, made over and over again, was the basic cause of the last global economic meltdown. People looking for a profit bundled assets together in ways that made it hard to unravel them in order to determine their true value. And these assets were traded at in the marketplace at values much greater than what they were really worth. And then the market collapsed.

On the one hand, these financial matters are way too complicated for someone like me to understand. On the other hand, I'll wager that the problem itself is simple. It's about people giving in to the temptation to use a false set of weights and measures in order to gain a dishonest advantage.

Ideally, businesses compete by weighing their product and then adding a fair amount for compensation. And in this way people are able to make a good living for themselves. That's as it should be. And if society generally operates in this way, it seems to me that it would be certainly true that we would all be able to live long and well in the land God has provided.

But when "false weights and measures" come into the picture and deceit is used to mislead buyers and to charge prices that are far

beyond anything that could be called fair compensation, and companies look to secretly create an unfair advantage, then one way or another things begin to go badly and God's favor begins to sour.

So, I think that the decision we make to be honest should be understood as an act of denying ourselves. It puts us at a disadvantage in a world where cheating pays. A person who is honest is willing to suffer for what is right, for how things should be and for the greater good, even at personal cost. Being honest, then, is a way of setting our mind on the divine reality God wants to bring into being, and not giving in to the earthly way of deceiving others to get ahead.

### **Honesty**

I've been talking mostly in terms of the marketplace. But obviously the choice to represent the value of things honestly applies to everything we do. Every word we speak carries either a true or a false weight; It is spoken either an attempt to represent something fairly or to mislead.

When a man tells his wife that he is working late at the office, when he is actually visiting a mistress or when a student turns a minus into a plus on a report card or when a person calls in sick and then goes to the beach, all of these are basically equivalent to using a false set of weights and measures. And when others see through the scam or are burned

by it, it contributes to an atmosphere of distrust that does great damage to a community that needs to rely on the honesty of its members in order to thrive.

We are living in a time of rampant dishonesty. Every other phone call is a scam. A bicycle left without a lock on it will likely be stolen, and the news reports a constant drumbeat of scandals. In each case, someone turns to an act of dishonesty in the belief that they are making some personal gain. But what these actions really do is drive us all further from the divine life that our true hearts really seek.

### **Honesty is a Cross**

And so, it seems to me that being honest in a world in which dishonesty is often rewarded, is an important expression of what it means to “deny ourselves and take up the cross” in order to live. And because this is so, it seems to me that a good question for us to ask ourselves as part of our personal Lenten reflections is “How honest am I?”

And I would do this without even asking whether others are dishonest or whether their dishonesty makes our own seem justified. Stick with Jesus’s recommendation that we “remove the log from our own eye, before trying to take the speck from someone else’s eye” and keep the question directed at ourselves and ask “Am I applying the same set of

weights to myself that I apply to others?” When I look in the mirror and say out loud the words, “I’m basically an honest person,” what do I feel when I look into my eyes, or can I even say it without looking away?” I think that is one source of Lenten reflection that can lead us to a proper repentance and point our hearts in the direction of Easter and the resurrection.