

Proverbs 1: 20 – 33
James 3: 1 – 12
Mark 8: 27 – 38
16 Pentecost, Proper 19

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Bainbridge Island, Washington
September 13, 2015

“Profit and Loss”

Today is Celebration Sunday. Today we, with delight, welcome back our wonderful choir led by Maestro Paul Roy. Today some of us will troll the congregation looking for volunteers to assist us with our various ministries. Today, we will sign children up for Godly Play – our contemporary version of Sunday school. Today, we admit that it is not the middle of summer and that we don’t have weeks of leisure activities still ahead of us. Today, mothers all over America heave a sigh of relief because school has started and someone else gets to spend the day with their charming and delightful children. In an odd sort of way, we are mentally reviewing our profit and loss statements for the summer. I suspect each of us, from time to time, calculates our personal profit and loss statements, as we try to assess how it is we are doing. I imagine doing fun things with family and friends goes in the profit column. Getting sick, being in pain, losing a game, having the deer eat one’s prized flowers all go in the loss column. In summary, we try to work out whether we are doing well – making a profit of our lives, or whether this period of our lives is a partial or even total loss with us edging nearer to a form of human bankruptcy.

Congregational leaders make this sort of assessment – and often about this time of year. As we begin a new program year we try to assess how we are doing – are we in the black or in the red? Do we have leadership for our desired programs? Do we have the right mix of programs? Are we headed in the right direction that might bring us to what churches understand to be profit?

So, our readings for our Celebration Sunday touch on similar issues – both individual notions of profit and loss in the conduct of our lives and, by inference, the same questions as applied to our own congregation.

“Who do people say I am,” asks Jesus. His disciples must have looked at each and thought – “oh boy, here he goes again, pop quiz time!” Their answers are not incorrect but they reveal that the disciples are still stuck in the old accounting of profit and loss. In that world, what one person has must have been taken from another person – the “zero-sum game” notion. Thus, if Jesus is powerful – and they have seen that he is very powerful – then Jesus must be just like great prophets and leaders from the past. Peter’s use of the term Messiah is couched in the notion of a great King who will conquer Israel’s enemies and return Israel to political, economic, and military greatness. But Jesus is not and never will be that kind of Messiah. Profit and loss, in God’s view, is vastly different than human views.

So, having rebuked poor Peter, Jesus calls in the crowds, who apparently were hanging around, hoping for a cool miracle like more bread and fishes, and Jesus starts his lecture about God’s Kingdom 101. It reads remarkably like a couple of Tweets linked together – “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Or, “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.” And, finally, “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

For Jesus, profit and loss are the reverse of what the world sees as profit or loss. Jesus points to a world in which leaders are servants. Jesus points to a world in which giving is superior to receiving. Jesus points to a world in which greatness is defined by what we do to the least among us. Jesus points to a world in which if any of us are left behind, without help or hope, then all of us are lost.

It is a powerful irony that we spend so much time and energy to accumulate the things of this world all the while knowing that we cannot take them with us. Indeed, nothing is really ours, we just have the use of it for a time and then it all reverts to the one true source as we ourselves will revert to the one true source.

As we work and struggle to make our way in the world, we might want to spend some time, regularly, in asking ourselves the tweets that Jesus posed to his followers. “Who do people say I am?” When we forgo time with family and friends to spend more time making money, we might ask that question. When we engage in dubious activities, things that harm us or harm others, we might ask that question. And in the later parts of our lives, we might ask, “Who do people say I was?”

We might also take out our personal profit and loss statements and review them as many of us review our investments and financial portfolios. How are we doing? Where might we count our profits and our losses? What makes a profit or a loss in our personal lives? Sometimes, we realize that our profits were, in the end, losses for we paid too high a price for an ephemeral victory. Sometimes, we realize that those painful losses we brooded over for so long were the beginnings of new life and great profit. Sometimes, we realize we should have zigged when we zagged and sometimes we realize that an odd thought or action or decision led us to new awareness of ourselves, of others, of our world. Sometimes, it takes a whole life before we can make sense of the profits and losses of our lives.

And this is true for congregations. I spend more time than is good for me fretting about our parish profit and loss statements. I chart our wins and losses – ups and downs – successes and failures as if I was reporting to the Wall Street Journal. When new people show up, when babies are baptized, people married, new leaders say yes to ministry, when great ideas are proposed and implemented, my mental chart shows lots of black ink. When wonderful parishioners die or move away, when we don’t hold members, when long-time leaders step down, when heating systems fail, when contractors disappear, when we don’t make the Bainbridge Island Review as the Best Place to Worship, oh, the red ink in my mind flows thickly.

So, I get a grip on myself and re-read the Gospel and remind myself that God’s ways are not our ways and that God does not calculate profit and loss as humans do. For God sees failure quite differently than we do. God is not afraid of embarrassment. God is not afraid to fail. God is not afraid to make the last first and the first last. God is not even afraid to suffer and die – in the human sense – to show the rest of us the way to something far better – a life lived so fully, so

richly, so joyously, so intensely, that death is not the end – death is merely another evolution of life itself.

I will, of course, continue to calculate profit and loss statements for Saint Barnabas, those human things Peter is warned about. But I pray that, as I do, I will remember the words of our Gospel and take a bit more of God's view of this odd, funny enterprise we call church. I pray that I will shoulder the cross assigned to me – not the one I would choose – and gladly follow Jesus wherever I might go. For there is no loss but only profit in walking with Jesus. May we find each other along the Way, with our crosses, following Jesus. Amen.