

Profit and Loss

If somebody had asked me at age 15 what the most famous verse was in the Bible, I would probably have picked not John 3:16 but a verse from Matthew's gospel which we heard constantly from our pulpit. We heard it in the language of 1611, by the way, since the King James Bible was the only version we considered authentic, and in that translation the verse goes like this: "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" The minister would say the words with solemn emphasis and then let them echo in the sanctuary for a while so we could all ponder what losing one's soul meant. And to us it meant only one thing, because he had already explained that. It meant spending eternity in some awful place called Hell, whose topography — if we dared to forget it — he would call to our attention on a fairly regular basis.

So there we sat, willing to terrify ourselves, except that the grownups were all middle-class working people who knew it would be a good month if they could pay all the bills, and that they were nowhere close to "gaining the whole world." That sort of triumph was almost too remote to comprehend, but if it belonged to anyone it belonged to men like John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford, and so instead of being truly frightened we actually began to be somewhat comforted as we compared the danger they faced with the safety provided by our poverty. We were not a unique group in figuring out how to interpret the Bible so that it spoke to someone else and not to us. There's been a great deal of comfort taken from that verse by poor Christians who interpret it to mean that the wealthy, who seem to be gaining the whole world, will have to pay for it by spending eternity in a

place hotter than Death Valley and with no air conditioning. After I was grown, and modern translations had shed new light on some of those old verses, I understood what Jesus said in a way that made much more sense to me. In the *New English Bible*, for example, the great question reads this way: “What will a man gain by winning the whole world, at the cost of his true self?” (Sorry about that sexist language! Modern versions, using inclusive language — as they certainly should — would put it something like this: “What do men and women gain if they win the whole world at the cost of their true selves?”)

It’s one of the most challenging ideas in the Bible — that being genuine is too important to trade off for getting to be boss, or principal, or president; and that if we lose our true selves we are bankrupt in the worst possible sense. A hot place isn’t mentioned in the verse, and isn’t very real anyway for a great many Christians, but we do understand what it means to be phony for so long that finally there is nothing left of us. And this is not something we know just in theory: most of us know some-body in real life, at home or work or school, who has already paid that price.

If that’s what Christ was really concerned about, pretending and calculating until we have made a mockery of what it means to be human, then I think he would have enjoyed a line from Eliot’s well-known poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” J. Alfred, as his last name hints, is not exactly a virile, resolute sort of man, open and honest with people. He is one, instead, who by his own admission has measured out his life with coffee spoons at anemic little gatherings where honesty would be about as welcome as a tiger — a

man afraid of the remarks others might make if he turns his back, a man who carefully calculates how to get by in any social context by reminding himself that there will be “time to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.”

I warn you, from experience, against letting that line get too deeply lodged in your head, because if you do you’ll be surprised at how often it pops up to the surface to remind you that you are doing exactly what it says: preparing a face to meet the faces that you meet. Eliot was making a little fun of J. Alfred, with his wardrobe of special faces, but he knew that the only difference between his character and us is a matter of degree. We all prepare faces to meet the faces that we meet, and we get so good at putting them on and off, and knowing which face goes with which place, that we are hardly aware that this is what we are doing.

Perhaps that’s just when the greatest danger comes....when we are no longer aware of the game we play. We have a face for home, one for business, one for church, one for the guys at the poker party, one for the ladies at the afternoon lecture. If we’re in the habit of being honest at all, this idea comes as no surprise, and we can defend our many faces on the very plausible ground that if one doesn’t learn how to be a chameleon of sorts there is no way to get along smoothly in society. So how does all this relate to Christ’s remark that we’d better take care in making a success of one kind or another that we don’t lose ourselves? Well, like this, I think: how many different faces can we wear, and how different can they be from our real selves, before suddenly we have

gone past the point where we can't even find the real self anymore? Before it is lost? (Which means, of course, that we are lost).

I still hear, occasionally, the kind of radio evangelist who talks confidently of those who are "saved" (they're in the church) and those who are "lost" (they're out in something called "the world"), but I don't think Christ would do that today at all. When you think about people who've been phony so long they can't even locate their true selves anymore, do you think only of non-church members? Would you be willing to argue, from your own experience, that it's the church which separates the genuine people from the phonies — that those who come regularly to church are open, honest people while those who don't are full of hypocrisy and self-deception? I doubt it. It's not that easy. The whole business of honesty is not simple. Let me give you an example:

Once, in another church, I sat in on the examination of a young man whom we were supporting while he studied for the ministry. When it was over, the group voted to suspend our support because the young man's responses were often radical. Some of them, I must admit, were as impractical as some of the things Christ himself said, and the young man seemed unlikely to use much diplomacy in expressing them from a pulpit. I found him very bright and very promising, and because I felt that seminary and his first church would quickly teach him how to be honest without being brutal — in short, how to prepare a face to meet all those faces — I voted to continue his support. I may have been wrong, and perhaps his stubborn idealism needed just the kind

of reality check the Missions Board gave him, but I have often thought since of what a sobering experience it must have been to some on that Board to witness his surprising honesty — still so naked and uncalculating. We asked him what he thought, and so he told us. Had he been a little wiser in the ways of the world he could have tiptoed around and chosen his words more cleverly, and continued to draw our rather generous support. I don't know what happened to him, but I hope that if he went on to become a minister he managed to hand on to some of that honesty and idealism which are in such short supply in the world and in the church.

What we might remember, in the context of this sermon, and in all our dealings with one another, is that people can get “lost” in church just about as easily as out of it, and that Christ was warning us how bad a bargain it is if we lose our authentic selves in the scramble for recognition or power or safety or whatever it is we are willing to keep murdering honesty in order to possess. He talked much more about how we relate to one another in these ways than he did about ritual or church government, so he must have noticed how hard it is for people to be open and honest in their relationships. When we consider why we practice the evasions which keep us from good relationships with others, it will probably help if we think about the answer most of us would give to this question: Who are the people we admire most? Who are the people we like most of all to be with? The answer to both questions is likely to be the same: it is the people with whom we feel we can be ourselves. We hear people say, over and over, “I like being with so-and-so because I feel I can be myself without having to pay for it.”

We're lucky if we know even a few friends like that. It must have been the frustration he felt about the games of pretense we play to get along that caused the French philosopher Sartre to offer this stinging definition of hell. "Hell," he said, "is other people." Sure, it's an overstatement, but it has the shock value he wanted, and there is truth in it. It's not easy to establish a relationship marked by trust and by an atmosphere so uninhibited that we have freedom to be ourselves. There are many roads to that kind of friendship; I have time to mention just a couple.

One is that deceptively simple thing called "listening." How do you like talking to someone who asks you a question and then, while you respond, his eyes are wandering around the room to see what he might be missing while standing there with you? You realize suddenly that the interest in you, professed for a moment, is phony, and you feel like a fool. What if the person were suddenly perceptive and candid enough to say, "Hey, look, I'm not with you right now, and I apologize. My head's full of other things. Please forgive me." Our first reaction might be annoyance, I suppose, that another mind could find something more interesting than we are, but I know that my own second reaction would be: "Well, at least he was honest with me, and paid me the compliment of assuming that I would appreciate honesty." We hate pretense, which is a kind of ultimate insult and which means that the pretender has lost a genuine self.

Or maybe just doesn't care to make the effort to reveal that self. We are tired, sometimes, or the other person involved just doesn't mean enough at the moment to arouse our interest. Listen to this little piece of

dialogue I found the other day and see if it doesn't sound familiar — not from your own experience, of course, but from something your neighbor has told you: “Hi honey,” she says. “How are you?” **Tired.** “How was your day?” **Fine.** (Sigh) “Nice to get the kids down so we can be together.” **Yeah.** “Boy! This is the greatest book. Listen to this....” **Wait ‘til a commercial, OK?** “Sure.....Honey, I have a question about a missing check when you have a minute.” **Sure. Later.** “Uh, I’m really sorry to keep bothering you, but it’s bedtime now and I sure would like to discuss something with you....” **Minute!....Best part of the movie.** “Honey, Richard fell off the roof this morning and cracked his head open, and your mother’s house burnt down.” **Okay. Fine.**

Later. That piece of dialogue is exaggerated, I hope, for purposes of humor, but it gets close enough to home to be worth hearing. There should be college seminars in the art of listening....but they should include the art of saying something worth listening to.

One word more. There cannot be a good relationship if one of us pretends to welcome an honest opinion about something, but plans to make the other pay if it’s the wrong one. You’ve heard the beguiling invitation: “Come on now, tell me what you really think. I want to hear it. I really do.” So you slide into the trap, and it snaps shut, and you pay and pay and pay. Your friend pretended to ask for honesty but only wanted agreement.

Here’s a true story from my life as teacher:

The professor asked her students to evaluate her course on some sheets of paper she had passed out during the final. One fellow thought it had been good, so he complimented it, but he also dared to point out a

few weaknesses — remembering that the teacher had said, “Don’t sign the evaluation paper.” He got a “C” in the course, although he had gotten “A’s” on every exam during the semester. By hook or crook — crook, I think — he found out that his professor had used a code system for identifying who wrote what. In the corner, on the backside of the paper, she had given each student a letter - A, B, C — and then she had tied that letter with the named in her gradebook. She had asked for honesty, but what she wanted was praise, and she was already well on the way to losing her true self because she could only recognize that part of herself which was being successful.

Do you remember the neighbor in Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall”? The one who said, “Good fences make good neighbors,” and then liked saying it so well that he said it again? “Good fences make good neighbors”? Well, I feel so keenly the challenge in what Christ said that I want to say it one more time: “What do we gain, no matter how much we make or how fast we rise or how many we impress, if it comes at the cost of our true selves?”

I’ve been reading a medical doctor’s excellent but very disturbing book called *How We Die*, a book filled with case histories of people over the years whom the doctor has attended in their final hours. He was surprised at how many of them knew at the last that in reaching some goal they had set for themselves they had taken love and friendship and family for granted, and lost their true selves. They wished, in that moment of illumination, for another chance. We still have it.

Help us be as honest as we can and still be decent and kind, our

Lord, and keep us from all those forms of dishonesty which are

only meant to serve ourselves. Amen.