Sunday, April 17, 1988
LIVING THE GOOD LIFE
Mark 10:17-22; Matthew 13:44-46

Is this all there really is? Was there something I was supposed to do with my life? What is the good life?

Being able to live the good life has always been part of the American dream, and this dream and definition of the good life has had many versions. One of the latest versions of the good life emerged after World War II and has been part of many people's definition of the good life ever since.

The formula goes something like this: a home in the suburbs, or in the case of Lincoln, a little bit away from the downtown area; two or more cars in the garage, or usually in the driveway or on the street because the garage is filled with other things; several color television sets, a patio (now a deck), outdoor barbecue, green lawn, and perhaps a boat.

This definition of the good life is based on the assumption that meaning and happiness can be found by accumulating more and more creature comforts and status symbols. In this definition, for example, an automobile becomes more than a basic means of transportation. It also becomes a symbol that will remind ourselves and others of our success — that we have it made.

A second version of the good life, in addition to the accumulation of all kinds of things, is that the good life consists of being successful — having power — climbing the ladder of social and vocational mobility. This success definition of the good life has often been symbolized by the Horatio Alger stories, whose heroes embody the virtues and blessings of success. Alger's heroes were aggressive, individualistic, lucky, hard-working, honest enough to secure the trust they needed to succeed, and of course, masculine.

Here too, the good life consists of making lots of money, having the right kind of connections, and achieving social power through success in the business world or one of the professions. That this definition is still widely held can be seen in the fact that such books as Winning Through Intimidation are popular. People want to get ahead and win, no matter how, because they are convinced that then they will be living the good life.

Status, power over others, money, and social prestige are believed by many to lead to human wholeness, meaningfulness, and happiness — the good life.

Incidentally, the real Horatio Alger had his own troubles. Despite the fact that his popular success stories brought him wealth and fame, his own life was little short of tragic. He never married or experienced the fulfillments of genuine mutuality with men or women, though he wanted these relationships desperately. He had two affairs with women who remained married to their husbands; he eventually suffered serious mental illness and spent his last days in the kind of boarding houses from which his successful fictional heroes had escaped.

No matter how much money we have or how little, sooner or later, we all start to ask: Is this all there really is? Was there something I was supposed to do with my life?

Oscar Wilde once wrote: “In this world, there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.” He was trying to warn us that no matter how hard we work at being successful, success won’t satisfy us. By the time we get there, having sacrificed so much on the altar of being successful, we will realize that success was not what we wanted.

People who have money and power know something that you and I do not know and might not even believe when we are told. Money and power do not satisfy that unnameable hunger in the soul. Even the rich and powerful find themselves yearning for something more. Like all the rest of us, they ask, “Is this all there really is? Was there something I was supposed to do with my life?”

And it’s ever been so. One day a man came running to Jesus. It was someone Jesus had never met before. This individual had come to ask what for him was the ultimate question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Here was a person who was searching for meaning and purpose in his living. He was asking, “Is this all there really is?” He knew there must be something more to life. He wanted to be living the good life.

This man was rich, and he had kept all the commandments. He was an upright moral person. He was successful as we would define success, but he still found an emptiness in his life.

What can we learn from this man’s encounter with Jesus about living the good life?

Finding and living the good life is, according to Jesus, more a matter of “being” than a matter of “doing.” Let me explain.
This man asked Jesus, “What must I do?” His life was filled with doing things. He had kept the commandments. He had done enough things to be successful. So naturally, he thought, “There are some more things I must do. I must have two cars instead of one, a bigger house, a job that pays more money.”

Or maybe he thought Jesus had some new psychological techniques that Jesus could give him.

The same is true today. We like to believe that doing more things will bring meaning to our living. We like to believe that using the proper technique will save us. Sometimes, as I stand in the check-out line of the local supermarket, I can’t help but notice the headlines on the magazines in the racks. One bold-faced headline after another promises a better personal life through psychological intervention and attitude manipulation. If these were to be believed, one could learn how to live, succeed through coercion, and live out the wildest of fantasies simply by following the formulas contained in the text. It is only a matter of acquiring the proper technique, a matter of doing the right things.

But all of this is a misconception about life, according to Jesus. The idea that the good life, or salvation, or finding wholeness can be won by doing any one thing or a number of things is false. The man was on the wrong road, and this was part of what Jesus told him. He was looking for some act to be done or a series of actions that would be the answer to his search.

It’s like a person asking, “What must I do to be happy?” You don’t become happy by pursuing happiness. You become happy by living a life that means something. The happiest people you know are probably not the richest or most famous, probably not the ones who work the hardest at being happy by reading articles and buying books and latching on to the latest fads. I suspect that the happiest people you know are the ones who work at being kind, helpful,

giving, and reliable, and happiness sneaks into their lives. You don't become happy by pursuing happiness. It is always a byproduct, never a primary goal.

Jesus said to the young man, "You lack one thing." In other words, there's nothing else you must do in the sense of accomplishing something or having more things with which to surround yourself. "Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come follow me."

Jesus was saying to this individual that he needed to be a different kind of person. He needed to be transformed, changed into a kind and loving person, not only in relation to a project or an organization but in relation to everything around him. In this man's case, Jesus knew that his wealth was a block to what he needed to become. It was keeping him from being the kind of person he needed to be if he was to live the good life.

Living the good life is frequently a matter of being able to let go of or get rid of some things in our life.
So whether a person is a farmer, a teacher, a dentist, a preacher, a lawyer, a factory worker, a street sweeper, a homemaker, or an artist, the essential elements of the good life are to be found in ourselves and in our relationships with others wherever we find them. And if our wealth, or our possessions, or anything else blocks us from that kind of being, then Jesus says we have to get rid of whatever is the block.

That's what Jesus meant when he told the man to sell all and give away the proceeds. "Follow me, and I will help you become the kind of person who experiences the good life."

When Jesus told the man to sell all that he had and give to the poor and come follow him, he was stating a very important principle for living the good life. And that principle is this: Sometimes in life, we need to become less to be more. We become whole people not on the basis of what we accumulate but by getting rid of everything that is not really us, everything false and inauthentic. Sometimes to become whole, we have to give up the dream.

The dream might be the vision we had when we were young — maybe planted there by teachers or parents or by our own imagination — that we would be somebody truly special. Perhaps we dreamed that our names would be famous, that our work would be recognized, that our marriage would be perfect, and our children extraordinary. When things do not turn out that way, we feel like failures. We will never be happy until we stop measuring our real-life achievements against that dream. We will never be comfortable with who we are until we realize that who we are is special enough. If we have succeeded in becoming authentically human, enjoying our lives each day, and enjoying life with the people we love, then we don't have to become rich and famous.

In the book, Seasons of a Man's Life, Dr. Daniel Levinson sees middle adulthood as offering the opportunity to renounce the "tyranny of the dream" and become successful on more realistic terms. He writes, "When we as individuals no longer feel that we must be remarkable, then we are more free to be ourselves and work according to our own wishes and talents."

There's an old Jewish saying that goes like this: "One hour in this world is better than all of eternity in the World to Come." What does it mean? I take it to mean that when we have truly learned how to live, we will not need to look for rewards in some other life. I believe that's exactly what Jesus was suggesting to this rich man when he asked him to sell all he had, give to the poor, and come follow him. Remember, the man had asked him what he must do to

inherit eternal life. Jesus refocused the man's attention on living the good life here and now. If one can live the good life here and now, then eternity will take care of itself.

Living the good life consists of being, of experiencing a sense of place, a sense of belonging to one another and to God, of having an inner sense of personal dignity which does not depend on outward circumstances like the size of one's house or the kind of car we drive. Living the good life comes from the experience of being loved and accepted for ourselves and of loving and accepting others in the same way.

Living the good life means learning to savor life each hour and each day and not being anxious about tomorrow. Living the good life does not mean that our lives will be devoid of trouble, sadness, or tragedy. Indeed, for the Biblical writers, life is tragic as well as happy. To experience life in its fullness is to experience weakness as well as power, losing as well as winning, anxiety as well as confidence.

Living the good life means, above all, placing our ultimate faith in God and in God's goodness. The good news is that God redeems our failures. God gives us hope in a way that no human agent can. On a human level, most of us are familiar with Murphy's Law: "Anything that can go wrong, will." At the Divine level, there is another opposite law: "Anything that should be set right sooner or later, will." God assures us in a way that no one else can, that what we do not achieve in our lifetime will be completed beyond our lifetime and in part because of what we did in our lifetime. Good deeds are never wasted and not forgotten.

What cannot be achieved in one lifetime will happen when one lifetime is joined to another. People who never knew each other in life become partners in making good things happen because the Eternal God gives their deeds a measure of eternity.

Finding and living the good life is finding the Kingdom of God, and it is of ultimate value. Jesus said it is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Or it is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Unfortunately, the rich man who came to Jesus was not like the person in each of these parables; he was not willing to sell all that he had in order to gain the good life, and the Gospel of Mark says that he went away sorrowful. It's a decision we all have to make time and time again. Are we willing to place our ultimate faith and hope in God? Or are we afraid of the risk and go away sorrowful? Amen.