

Ash Wednesday, 2017

The movie *City Slickers* is about Mitch, a man who reaches middle-age asking the kind of questions which often arise between the innocence of youth and the resignation of old age. What really matters? Where is the zest I used to feel for living? How do I find some enthusiasm to get me out of bed? Contemplating both suicide and adultery as the solution for his doldrums he agrees to a vacation at a dude ranch with two of his friends. There Mitch meets Curly a craggy, wind-burned trail boss who both terrifies and intrigues him. Curly listens to Mitch obsess about his struggles for a while but finally he looks at him hard and asks

“Do you know what the secret of life is? [holds up one finger] This.”

“Your finger?” asks Mitch

“One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don't mean s**t.”

But, what is the "one thing?" asks Mitch.

Curly smiles impishly and says, “That's what *you* have to find out.”

Today we come to Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. There are a lot of ways to frame this season, but perhaps it is all about finding that elusive “one thing.” We live in a culture which perpetually inundates us with information. Most of us have schedules which call us to hit the floor running, push all day, and collapse into bed—perhaps with a quick prayer that we sleep well enough to do it all again. We have no shortage of stimuli or ways to spend our day; what we often lack is the ability to sift the wheat from the chaff, to discern what is truly important.

That's where the disciplines of Lent come in. There is no particular virtue in giving up something for Lent if all we are doing is trying to prove we can do it. Lent is not about making ourselves uncomfortable for no reason. The point of disciplines such as fasting, focused prayer, and intentional acts of mercy is to help us step back from our daily grind to ask, “What makes life worth living? What blessing does God want to give me this day? What does God need from me at this moment?” Lent is not about adding one more thing to a busy schedule; it is about ruthlessly pruning things which do not make for meaning.

The prophet Joel admonishes us, “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” We seldom say, “I don't care what God desires of me,” but very often we **are** like a ship slowly drifting off course, subtly driven by whatever currents and winds are around us. “Return,” says Joel, “refocus, recalibrate your path, find a renewed sense of purpose in God's love.” So for a season we make a particular effort to focus on the one thing which ultimately is most important, finding our place in the heart of God.

That is really what Jesus is asking us to do in our gospel. There is specific counsel on how we are to pray and give alms. But those are examples of a more fundamental teaching. Jesus asks that we care more about the substance of discipleship than the image

we may have before others. The main thing is not to seem but to be, not to give ourselves to pursuit of ephemeral admiration but to cultivating a deep sense of God's presence, guidance, and care.

We began with one movie, let us end with another. One of cinema's most powerful images occurs near the end of the Humphrey Bogart classic, *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*. Throughout the movie we have seen greed slowly transform Bogart's character, Fred C. Dobbs, from a poor drifter into a paranoid treasure hunter. Dobbs and his partners find a gold mine, but the dream of riches causes Dobbs to become a murderer. And it is all for nothing. Parched by thirst, Dobbs dies in the desert, murdered by bandits for his pack mules. The bandits, taking his treasure for bags of sand, rip them up and leave them slowly seeping gold dust on the ground. The camera pans across the desolate landscape, as the wind scatters the golden dust in all directions.

This could be the visual for Jesus' warning, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." This Lent let us give ourselves to the one thing which endures when all else has passed away, to know and live in God's love. Let us open ourselves to receiving the treasure offered to us as pure gift, the promise of our Lord's unflinching care.