

Profit and Loss

Text: St. Mark 8:31-38

How do we count profit and loss? Is it easy to do?

Well, I suppose, it, of course, depends upon what you are counting in life. With money, for example, it is quite easy to determine when one has made a profit and when one has suffered a loss. For instance, this last September I opened the quarterly statement for my retirement account. I was puzzled when I read it, for it was pretty much what it had been the previous quarter, despite the fact that Georgetown Church had been making, supposedly, agreed upon contributions to the account. Perhaps in the change to a new employer something had gone wrong, I surmised. Thus, before I went to complain to Ameriprise, I asked Barbara here if the checks had been written. She looked, and assured me that they had been; they had also been cashed. I now knew I had a battle on my hand with unfeeling and unhearing corporate America to find out why my account did not reflect the deposit of these checks. Fortunately before I made a complete fool out of myself, before I made a call to my account manager, I looked again and more closely at the statement. As it turned out, the checks had, indeed, been received and credited. The problem was that because of the considerable drop in the market I had lost exactly as much as I had put in. In short, there was a considerable loss. Fearing the worst, I didn't even bother opening the December statement. I am pretty sure that I was not the only one to experience such a shock in the last few months and to recognize that it has gotten worse since September. In fact, we all know that if the market were to reach the pathetic level it was at in September that we would regard it as white hot. On money, then, there is no real difficulty about how to judge profit and loss.

Other things in life are more complicated, but in cases such as love, career, and social

standing, even in those cases we have markers by which to make the judgement of profit and loss. Any young man can confidently say that he has profited from the ardors of courtship if the girl he loves says she will marry him. Similarly, one's college choice was a profitable one if it helped one into a desired profession, and it was also profitable if it has kept one reading books and learning more about music, art and history. Your career will have been a profitable one, not only if you earn a good salary, but also if you have the esteem of your colleagues, and have been promoted to high ranking and significant positions. You will have the profit of the respect and admiration of your friends, neighbors, and colleagues, and especially of your high school classmates who thought you were a loser, by living in certain houses and neighborhoods, and are able to drop certain names as personal acquaintances, and if you know the e-mail addresses of well placed people you can reach out to, and if you are a go-to guy in civic affairs. So even in these more complex cases, we know how to account profit and loss.

Yet, if we know how to do so in all these areas of life, the accounting gets a lot more difficult when we consider whether life itself is profitable or not. How, after all, *do* we answer Jesus' question, "What does it profit one to gain the whole world and yet forfeit one's life?" How does one reckon the profit and loss with respect to the soul? How do we even know we have souls?

Difficult as it may be, the fact of the matter is that we actually know how to reckon the soul's profit and loss pretty accurately, although we don't always do it in a very timely manner.

The great English theologian of the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman, for example, suggested that this accounting happens to pretty much all of us at some point in life. He argues this way: To know that we have souls is to recognize that we are something different than just the world out there; to have a soul is to be able to act for ourselves, to have some

individuality, to be accountable, he says. We are not just things. However, it often takes some time to recognize this and often we do not recognize it until we have traveled far in the opposite direction. “We look off from self to the things around us, and [we] forget ourselves in them.” We are not in charge of our lives, we are caught up in things, and don’t see ourselves as distinct from them. We think we *are* our financial profit and loss, our career successes and failures, the things that make our neighbors envious. But then comes a different sort of accounting, one that lets us know that we are different than things, that lets us know that we do have a soul. Newman explains the revelation this way in wonderful Victorian prose: “The unprofitableness and feebleness of the things of this world are forced upon our minds; they promise but they cannot perform, they disappoint us. Or, if they do perform what they promise, still they do not satisfy us. We still crave for something, we do not well know what; but we are sure that it is something which the world has not given us. Its changes are so many, so sudden, so silent, so continual. It never leaves changing; it goes on to change, till we are quite sick at heart.” In short, we recognize we have souls and that we are not just things precisely at the point that we come up against the fact that we have been accounting our lives as if we were things, and we recognize that life on that accounting is a big disappointment. It comes when we recognize that there has to be something more, and that to get something more, we need to change – and that we can change.

Let me give an extended example of this process of accounting for our lives, and recognizing where there has been hollowness in them. It comes from a play, *The Cocktail Party*, written by T. S. Eliot about 1950. The opening act is a cocktail party in London. There are five major characters: Edward and Lavinia, who are married to each other, and Celia and Peter. There is also a mysterious, unidentified guest, whom we much later learn is a psychiatrist of sorts, but much more of a doctor of the soul than those who normally give that as their profession. There

are complications with the inter-relations of the first four of these people. Edward is currently having an affair with Celia, and Lavinia one with Peter, although Peter really is quite interested in Celia, who is a brilliant and unusual young woman; indeed, it is remarked that she will go to concerts and museums on her own because she is actually interested in music and art. To add to these complicated webs of sordid relations, Lavinia has just left Edward, having discovered his affair. In short, these very successful people are living very unfulfilled lives and very unhappy ones. They are just beginning to make this accounting of what it means to gain the world and lose your soul and their conversation reflects it.

What the realization of this accounting means is summed up very nicely by the unidentified guest when Edward tells him of what a shock it had been when he discovered that Lavinia had left him, and without any seeming explanation. The guest admits that the mystery is a bit of a problem, that sense of unfinished business, but, he says to Edward, hitting the nail on the head, “there’s more to it than that. There’s a loss of personality. Or, rather, you’ve lost touch with the person you thought you were. You no longer feel quite human. You’re suddenly reduced to the status of an object – a living object, but no longer a person.” The feeling is one that comes on suddenly and unexpectedly. It’s like, the stranger says, “when you’ve dressed for a party and are going downstairs, with everything about you arranged to support you in the role you have chosen, then sometimes, when you come to the bottom step there is one step more than your feet expected and you come down with a jolt. Just for a moment, you have the experience of being an object at the mercy of a malevolent staircase.” The problem is, the stranger adds, we know so little about ourselves as we are and too often we find out that we “are nothing but a set of obsolete responses.”

In short, often our discovery that we have a soul, is precisely at the moment when by our

accounting of profit and loss, we discover that we are pretty close to losing our souls. Too often the discovery that we have souls comes when, like my retirement account, we have just encountered a loss.

But if this is how loss is often accounted, how does one account for profit to the soul? What *is* gain for the soul? To get a sense of what it is, let's look at the last act of *The Cocktail Party*.

This act takes place at another cocktail party two years later. Edward and Lavinia are back together again, thanks to the help of the unidentified stranger whom we know now as Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly. He has gotten them to see themselves as they actually are, and to overcome their defenses designed to cover up their own unlovability and isolation. Now, instead of Edward accusing Lavinia of his own faults, and her accusing him of hers, and thus avoiding understanding either themselves or the other, they have accepted their own faults, and in that found a bond, and have made the best of a job badly begun. That really is a sort of gain, and it needs to be taken seriously. But the better example of the soul's profit is elsewhere.

We hear of it in the news of Celia. Peter has just returned from making a movie in America. He inquires about Celia, who is not there. Another character, Alex, who has just returned from a diplomatic mission in some colony named Kinkanja has heard of her. Now, Alex went to Kinkanja because of riots and massacres that were taking place there. The problem was that because a plague and some religious issues surrounding it, the native Christians were being killed. What does this have to do with Celia? Well, as it turns out, because of her encounter with Sir Harcourt-Reilly, Celia had seen what she needed to do with her unfocused talents and great sensibilities; she had seen the challenge and call life really presented to her, and she had joined a religious order. As a member of that order, she had been nursing natives with two other sisters in

Kinkanja. Alex then relates this information about her: “And then the insurrection broke out among the heathen, of which I was telling you. The sisters knew of it, but would not leave the dying natives. Eventually, two of them escaped: one died in the jungle, and the other will never be fit for normal life again. But Celia Coplestone, she was taken. When our people got there, they questioned the villagers – those who survived. And then they found her body, or at least, they found the traces of it.” Local practices would indicate that she had been crucified very near an ant-hill.

The group is horrified. The loss of Celia is a great one for all of them, and as Lavinia says, it was “for a group of plague-stricken natives who would have died anyway.” It seems such a waste. Reilly does point out that there was value, though. He asks: “who knows the difference it made to the natives who were dying or the state of mind in which they died” to have had somebody there caring for them, not deserting them? But even granting his point they still think there was a waste. Edward, for his part, feels particularly guilty for this wasted life, since he seems to think that because of his ill-starred relationship with her, he had driven her to this.

But Reilly describes Celia, and her decision to go to Kinkanja and what she did with her life far better. He first tells everybody what happened when he met with her after that first cocktail party two years before. It had seemed to him then that she had an image of a violent death standing behind her during that party. “That was her destiny,” he said. “The only question then was, what sort of death? *I* could not know; because it was for her to choose the way of life to lead to death.” He then sums up her loss this way: “You blame yourselves, and because you blame yourselves, you think her life was wasted.” But, he strenuously insists, “It was *triumphant*.” Indeed, upon a proper accounting of profit and loss with respect to the soul, it was triumphant.

The accounting of profit and loss with respect to our souls is often a complete reversal of how we account profit and loss everywhere else in life. For profit to the soul is not how much we have acquired, but how much we have given away; it is not how much we are loved, but how much we have loved; it is not how much we have gotten done, but how long we have patiently waited. It is not how comfortable we have been, but how we have accepted God's calls and challenges. To have made those reversals is to know that you have a soul and that you are acting as a real self, as a person, and as one who is accountable.

That then is also how to answer Jesus' question: "What does it profit a person to have gained the whole world but to have lost his soul?" It is that reversal of value that is what Jesus meant when he said that we need to take up our cross daily, and that the one who would save his life will surely lose it, and that the one who is willing to give up his life will surely find it.

During the long season of Lent, we are in the midst of a penitential season. In order to save our souls, and to find profit in them, it is necessary to repent, But it is also necessary to know that repentance is not breast beating. It is not something that is damaging to our sense of self-worth, which is often pretty shaky. Rather, repentance is by the prayers we pray a matter of opening ourselves up to God, a matter of peeling away the layers of all the false self that we have accumulated and foolishly counted as profit up to now. Peeling away is not a matter so much of confessing failure; it is far more a matter of discovering a true self and of finding the good gift that lies at our center but which we have covered up with so much *stuff* that we can't see it anymore. In that sense it can be a joyous matter for it is a matter of being grateful for who we are, and of being grateful to a God who keeps that gift alive even when we have tried so hard to lose it. It is a matter of being freed, for in losing the world, we find its Source, and our own home.