

Week Three - The Altar of Plenty

Assigned Reading: Chapter 3

Matthew 16:21-26

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. **22** And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." **23** But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." **24** Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **25** For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. **26** For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

Brief Summary:

Kate begins the chapter with her meeting with a psychologist and sharing deeply and painfully. She says to the psychologist, "I don't want to die." In that tearful meeting, the psychologist shares some advice using an analogy of the journey of the Appalachian trail. He explains that many hikers often pack so much that the first stop forces them to ask this essential question, "Is there anything I can put down?" This begins a journey for Kate where she wonders, "What can I live without?"

Kate is especially critical of materialism where she writes, "We worship at the altar of plenty. Our heroes are corporate titans, fitness-empire builders, grinning televangelists, music legends, and decorated athletes whose gilded lifestyles and totalizing success hold out the promise of more. Twelve-car garages and infinity pools and walk-through closets and red-bottomed heels. Despite the boom and bust of the American economy over the last fifty years, we cling to stories of more-than-enoughness, believing the future is full to the brim for all of us." However, due to her pain, she begins to reconsider what is of value in her life. In a powerful quote she names that for her "pain is a narrow gate."

Kate begins treatment for an experimental trial in Atlanta where she has a "bruising" schedule of flying back and forth from Durham. During this time she encounters unsympathetic bureaucracies like the Duke transportation office where her application for a handicap parking place is rejected and she is told to take the bus. She also begins to receive bills for tens of thousands of dollars for medical treatment denied by insurance, which leads to her spending hours arguing on the phone.

At the end of the chapter Kate expresses her fear of "leaving her family this way." In this chapter Kate confronts the very real practical realities of facing death.

Discussion Questions:

1. As a result of her conversation with Peter, Kate ponders this question: "What can I live without?"
 - a. In this season of Lent, are we not led to ask this same question: "Is there anything I can put down?" Or, to put it another way during this season of Lent, are we not asked a similar question: "What is essential in our lives?"
 - b. Kate writes that "pain is a narrow gate." Have you ever had an experience where during a time of pain it has **reprioritized** what is important in your life? What did you learn from that experience? Did it inform how we are supposed to live? Does it still shape how you live now?
 - c. Also, as you read of her experience with the Duke Transportation office as well as her experience with insurance claims denied, do you not have compassion for her? Have you ever had a time when you have had to face the frustration of navigating systems during a time when you or a loved one was sick? What did you learn from that experience?
2. Our passage says, "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. **22** And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."
 - a. Why do you think Peter and the disciples did not want to hear this from Jesus?
 - b. How do we as people deal with the reality of suffering in our lives?
3. Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **25** For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. **26** For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"
 - a. How might this instruction of Jesus and Kate's question "Is there anything I can put down" relate?
4. In this moment in Kate's journey she honestly confronts her mortality. In this passage from Matthew, we hear Jesus naming that his journey will lead to the Cross.
 - a. How might those journey's relate? As you are discussing this question, consider that Jesus is called the "suffering servant."
5. How might our text, this chapter, and your group discussion inform your Lenten journey and how we are to live?

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