

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**August 31, 2020      Streaming Mass**  
**22 Sunday of Year A      Mt 16:21-27**

Labor Day coming up next weekend gives us the opportunity to reflect on what exactly are we working for, what does our job, our career, “mean” for us, what do we hope to attain from it, what is the meaning of “success” for us, what is its cost, what is the price I am willing to pay for it? Coincidentally, in today’s Gospel Jesus goes to the marketplace to find there a comparison between “gain” and “loss” in a material sense and the possible loss, He says, of one’s “life,” i.e., of one’s soul, of one’s sense of self, a loss of who I am at the very core of my existence. Jesus challenges Peter to consider what does Peter have to “gain” and what does he have to “lose” in being a disciple. It soon becomes clear that Peter does not really understand who Jesus is and what fidelity to preaching the Gospel entails. Peter seems to think that now he has it made; that the crowds that have come to listen to Jesus will keep on coming; and that he, being chief among the apostles, has his security and status assured. So, why did Jesus have to spoil it all with this talk about suffering and death? Why be so glum, Jesus, when the market projections seem so rosy?

I’d like to reflect on the question posed in today’s Gospel in light of the classic American play, Arthur Miller’s, “Death of a Salesman.” Here, we find Willie Lowman, a traveling salesman, at the end of his career. He is worn out. His hopes have never materialized. He has lived on his smile and on his dreams; he has managed to survive from sale to sale. But, as the play opens, this is the day that Willy Lowman is losing his job. His mistake is that he has gone through life as someone who has never dared to take stock of himself; as someone who never knew who he really was. His personality has become his profession and his profession his personality; his energy, his enthusiasm has served as his protection.

Finally Willie begins to see through himself, and realizes he is, he has been, a failure. So, his last desperate act to make some sense out of a misspent life will be to deliberately smash up his car to bring in some insurance money for his family in order to make the final mortgage payment on his home—but a house in which no one left wants to live. The tragedy of Willy Loman is that he gives his life, or sells it, in order to justify the waste of it. But, really, it was not so much his dreams, as his illusions, that did Willie in. Willie Loman lived his whole life as the salesman—that was the tragedy. He went about posturing himself, gauging the reactions of people, trying to see what they wanted out of him, always trying to read the room, calculating what was the best move to make, what to say or not to say. He lived his life as a kind of “reflex” in

response to the dictates and expectations of others. He was always what others wanted him to be—he could never be himself. He lived his life out of the corner of his eye, always checking out who was gaining on him, who was doing better, who was making a move against him.

We are reminded again and again that ours is the “age of the entrepreneur,” the era of the self-starter, of the go-getter. And this is certainly true in the very competitive atmosphere of New York City. “Death of a Salesman” can lead us to examine what are the dreams, or the illusions, we are buying into. How do we try to “market” or “sell” ourselves? Do the strategies of the marketplace invade the very personal areas of our lives and loves, so that here too deals are struck, trade-offs made, and power-plays pulled even in the affairs of the heart? Has a drive for success become almost an “addiction,” so that the things that matter most in life—faith, family, friendship—have been sacrificed in the attainment of that “success?”

At the time the play appeared on Broadway, A. Howard Fuller, the founder of the Fuller Brush Company, probably the epitome of the door-to-door salesman, remarked, “The fact that Willie Loman is by trade a salesman is important, but secondary. Central is that he has taken on a new—a social—personality which is calculated to insure his material success. In so doing he has lost his essential—his real—nature, which is contradictory to his assumed one, until he is no longer able to know what he truly wants, what he truly stands for. In that sense he has sold himself. He is Everyman who finds he must create another personality in order to make his way in the world. Willie is essentially a self-deluded man who has lost the power to distinguish between reality and the obsessions that come to dominate his life. He has sold himself by taking on an artificial personality that is wholly unrealistic.”

Jesus also speaks of loss and gain when He asks, “What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life (his soul, his very self, the core of who he is)?” Jesus recognizes what the young man Peter does not see, though the old man Peter will, that there is a deeper sense of “self” than that constructed in response to the false expectations and petty demands of those around us. Deeper than that superficial self which is constructed out of the materials of fear, insecurity, self-hate, greed and false pride, there is the deeper truer self, for which there may or may not be a buyer, but which is who we really are—which we can't trade in, which we have to learn to live with sooner or later. That deeper self, which we should never betray, is that quality whereby when the world pushes against us, as it inevitably will, we are capable of pushing back. The path to honoring that true self, who we really are in God's sight, and in our own eyes, is walked not in the manner of the salesman trying to shill the crowd, but in the manner of Jesus who walked to Calvary and Easter

Sunday. As we are reminded in today's Gospel, it is the path of honesty, of vulnerability, even at times, of brokenness, which is the path to a deeper, fuller life.

Let's pray that we can walk this path which has as its signposts love and acceptance, truth and compassion, not profit and gain, not the slick and the saleable, so that at the end of the journey, though to some we may appear to have lost, we will have preserved what matters most—our true sense of self.