

What's On the Test

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Sometimes you do something and you don't completely know what you've done.

When I was in grade school I made a mistake. And the mistake I made was that I accidentally won the school spelling bee. By some random twist of fate every time it came round to me I got some softball of a word – dog, cat, it – and before I knew it there were just two of us left on the stage – me and Shelly Massu. Now Shelly Massu was smarter than me in many ways – smart enough to know that if she won this thing it meant another round of spelling bee which meant more words, more study, more stress – so Shelly, I'm convinced, threw the match – and before I knew it, and before I could think of it, I was spelling correctly the last word and I was the Spelling Bee Champion of Gordon Elementary School. Now again, sometimes you do something and you don't completely know what you've done. So what I did not realize when I won the Spelling Bee was that this was just the beginning – not the ending. What I did not realize was that visions of grandeur were filling the mind of my mother. I was the youngest of four and when you are the youngest of four you are your mother's last shot at making something out of her children. And my mother was going to make something out of me – and so Spelling Bee Champion of the World was in her mind. So for the next three weeks my life became a life of words. My mother was bound and determined that I was going to learn how to spell every word in Webster's Dictionary. And so while my friends were out playing baseball I was in the world of words. And with every word came not only the correct spelling, but also the correct pronunciation – and also the definition. Now I would be lying to you if I told you that

these three weeks of words were ones of bliss – but I will tell you that they were three weeks in which my vocabulary went from here to there. I learned words that I never knew existed – I’m guessing you never knew existed. I was actually getting smarter and starting to sound intelligent when I spoke.

Now there were some words that I struggled to remember, words I was slipping up on – but so bound and determined was my mother to get me to win this thing – that one afternoon when I got home from school these elusive words were now printed on little placards and pasted to all the walls inside our house. Every room I went in I saw words. Correctly spelled words. I was beginning to feel like I was in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

Finally the day of the District championship came around – and... I went out on the second round. I’d like to tell you I threw it – but that would suggest that I even had a chance to begin with, which of course, I didn’t.

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I love the story of the older brother talking to his younger sister on her first day of first grade. Says the older brother to his younger sister: “Let me give you one piece of advice. Don’t learn how to spell CAT. Because once you learn how to spell CAT they just keep giving you harder words.”

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Every few weeks a couple stands in this chancel and exchange vows and rings and it is so wonderful and beautiful and lovely -- but anyone who’s been married knows that while they have made this eternal promise, they don’t completely know what they’ve done. What lies ahead is love and mystery and growth and challenge and arguments and ecstasy and twists and turns in the road – most of it they can’t see from this vantage point – but if they stay the course it is an amazing thing and their lives grow rich and deep.

When that same couple decides to have a child – as much as they have been children themselves and as many books as they have read about parenting and as certain as they are as to

how they will parent – they will do this thing, but they don't completely know what they have done. Every child is its own parenting journey filled with love and mystery and growth and challenge and arguments and ecstasy and spelling bees and soccer games and broken curfews and twists and turns in the road – and the truth is you never stop being this parent that you start out being. And through it all life grows rich and deep.

At the beginning of Matthew's Gospel he tells us a little story about two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew and James and John – fishermen by trade – who are down along the shore getting ready for another night of fishing – and Jesus comes up to them and says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And Matthew says that immediately they dropped their nets and left their boats and followed him. Talk about doing something and not knowing completely what you are doing. How were they to know what laid ahead? What is it supposed to mean when a rabbi says, "Follow me." What is it supposed to mean that you will be made to fish for people? What really am I signing up for? I've said yes, but I don't know really what that means.

It reminds me of that great scene in the movie *The Matrix* (that came out around the years our confirmands were born) in which this prophetic figure named Morpheus played by Laurence Fishburne comes face to face with a young man Neo played by Keanu Reeves and Morpheus explains to Neo that pretty much all of humanity is living in this delusional world of the Matrix. That they are prisoners to the matrix. The matrix is the world you can see - but that is the fake world - the delusional world. The world with the wool pulled over your eyes. But there is a way out of this fake world into the real world. And he hands to him two pills and offers him a choice between the two pills – the blue pill or the red pill. Take the blue pill and nothing changes and you continue to live in the fake, delusional world of the Matrix – or you take the red pill and you discover reality – what is true and real. You can choose the red pill, you can choose to learn what is real --but you don't really know what you are choosing until you choose it.

So Jesus offers to the four brothers the red pill and the blue pill and says choose the red pill. Choose to follow me and I will show you the real world – the real world of the kingdom of God. Not

the fake, delusional world of what you can see and touch and surf on your computer screen – but the real world of the spirit – the world you can't see and touch but that is more real. But sometimes you do something, sometimes you pick the red pill and you don't completely know what you are doing.

I wonder if that isn't a little bit of what happens in confirmation. Some of you remember your confirmation day – 24 of us today are living their confirmation day right now. Confirmation is that great moment when a lot of us are given that first chance to choose. The rabbi has approaches us in the midst of a crazy chapter of our lives – when we are busy in school, stressing about tests, playing some kind of sport, singing in a choir, playing an instrument, getting the lecture from our parents about keeping our grades up, surfing Facebook, checking instagram, texting our buddies, getting lectured from our parents about going to confirmation—confirmation comes at this crazy time when so much of the world is coming at us – and now all of a sudden the rabbi Jesus – the One we know as the Son of God – the Lord and Savior of the universe – stands before us with the blue pill and the red pill and says, “Choose the blue pill and nothing changes – you just keep on staying busy in school, stressing about tests, surfing Facebook, getting lectured from your parents about your grades and worrying about what college you'll go to. Nothing changes.” Choose the red pill and you hear the Messiah say to you, “Follow me and I'll make you fish for people. Follow me and I will show you the kingdom of God. Follow me and I will show you what is really real – the world of the spirit.”

Now the truth is when Jesus approaches us whether it's in confirmation or some other time in our lives – and he says, “Follow me,” and we say yes. We stand before our friends and family and say yes – we've done something, but we don't completely know what we've done. Sometimes we don't even think we're making a choice at all. Yeah, yeah, I'll follow Jesus but let me back to my twitter feed or let me get to brunch on time. But the truth is choosing Jesus really is a choice between one world and another world.

And this came to light for me recently when I decided to Google the word “success”. I googled success and these were the people that came up when I googled success. The first guy that came up was this guy:

- Little boy. I guess if anything he’s got the look of determination and eventual success. After him, the usual suspects:
- Steve Jobs
- Bill Gates
- Warren Buffett
- Michele Obama
- Maya Angelou
- Albert Einstein
- Michael Jordan
- Winston Churchill

Quite a list of names, to be sure. Pretty amazing people. Folks that have a lot of good things to say, to be sure. Folks who have been very successful. But in my Googling here’s one guy that didn’t show up:

- Jesus

Google success and you don’t get Jesus. And I got to thinking – there’s the two worlds, right? Of course you don’t get Jesus because Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world. When this world thinks of success it thinks of many things but it does not think of Jesus. Because we’ve been taking the blue pill. And we think that success has something to do with hard drives and money and elections and science and points on a scoreboard. That’s what the blue pill tells you.

But then we hear Jesus’ story about the Son of Man and all his angels who come in glory at the end of it all and all the nations appear before them – and they are all there to hear what success is about. What really mattered in the real world? In the kingdom of God? What really is on the test?

What happens when you take the red pill? What does success look like if we drop our nets and leave our boat after Jesus says, "Follow me?"

And Jesus says here's what success looks like:

- When I was hungry you gave me food.
- When I was thirsty you gave me something to drink
- When I was a stranger you welcomed me
- When I was naked you gave me something to wear
- When I was sick you took care of me
- When I was in prison you visited me
- Whenever the least of these appeared in your life and you did something – then that is the kind of thing that happens when you take the red pill. That's the kind of thing that happens when you say yes, when you drop your nets and leave your boat.

And it doesn't happen right away. Because there is so much we don't understand when any of us say yes to Jesus. But what lies at the heart of any of us saying yes to Jesus is the fact that Jesus already said yes to us. God in Christ has chosen to love us because of who we are and despite who we are. Let me say that again, God in Christ has chosen to love us because of who we are and despite who we are. God loves us for all the reasons we give him to love us and God loves us for all the reasons we give him not to love us. He loves the whole package.

And what we spend a lifetime learning after we've said yes to Jesus' yes, after we have taken the red pill – what we spend a lifetime learning is that the kingdom of God – the real world -- is all about discovering the joy of loving the people of the world – sometimes because of who they are and sometimes despite who they are. "In this is love," wrote the apostle, "not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the worthy sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. For no one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."

Sometimes you do something and you don't completely know what you've done. Sometimes you spell the word correctly – and a bunch of harder words follow. Sometimes you say your vows – and harder chances to love follow. Sometimes you say yes to the One who's said yes to you – sometimes you take the red pill – and what you find is that you've been loved because of who you are and despite who you are – and now you get to do the same. Fish for people. Love them because of who they are, and love them despite who they are. Such is what will be on the test.