

LOSE YOUR LIFE, FIND YOUR LIFE

September 3, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman
First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: Matthew 16:21-28

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 16:21-28

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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 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."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 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? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

The Word of the Lord...

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

Back in college I took a lot of courses in mathematics, subjects like calculus, differential equations, advanced algebra and point set topology. That was 40 years ago and today I could not solve a quadratic equation to save my life, but I have no regrets about taking those courses. As one of my math professors liked to say, mathematics teaches you how to think. So there is a side of me that enjoys a logical train of thought that comes to a clear, precise conclusion. A equals B, and B equals C, therefore A must equal C. But as much as I enjoy straightforward logic, I also like a nice paradox; something that holds together two truths that seem to contradict each other.

Now some paradoxes are clever and funny. Comedian George Carlin used to ask the question, "If you try to fail, and succeed, which have you done?" Then, of course, there is that great philosopher Yogi Berra who came up with lines like, "Half the lies they tell about me aren't true," as well as, "I never said most of the things I said." It was John Lennon who once said, "It is weird not to be weird." Just think about that for a moment. And who can forget that great maxim from Albert Einstein who once said, "All generalizations are false, including this one"?

But a good paradox is more than just a witty play on words. Often a paradox is the best way to explain how life works. It was Plato, writing 2400 years ago who stated, "I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing." This observation comes in many forms, but one way you hear it expressed is as, "The more you learn, the less you know." It does not matter what field of study, astronomy, biology, mathematics. Every new discovery, every answer that thinkers have been looking for raises dozens and dozens of more questions. The more you learn the less you know.

This is especially true in theology and biblical studies. Each week dedicated preachers everywhere spend hours studying a text from the Bible. They dig into the Greek or Hebrew trying to understand the best meaning of important words. They compare the text to other passages trying to get a clear picture of what is going on. They spend time in prayer, asking God to open up the Word and guide them into what must be said. Then we stand in the pulpit on Sunday morning striving to bring God's message to God's people. But I can tell you that as we preach we are full of questions. We have been blessed with just a tiny glimpse into God's infinite love and grace, and yes, we are excited about bringing the Word to you. But at the same time, there is so much more that is beyond our grasp. We have so many questions, because the more you learn the less you know, especially when it comes to the things of God.

Our text for this morning is at its core a huge paradox that seems impossible to comprehend. The verses we read this morning immediately follow a very important passage of scripture. It is the story of Jesus asking the disciples, "who do people say that I am?" Actually the question is, "Who are people saying that I am?" for the grammar implies an ongoing conversation. You probably remember how the story goes. The disciples respond with various answers. Some thought the spirit of John the Baptist had now settled on Jesus, and he was the one to carry on the Baptizer's work. Some thought that Jesus was fulfilling the role of Elijah, who was supposed to return to the people of Israel before the coming of the Messiah. Still others regarded Jesus as a prophet, coming from the same mold as those who long ago preached out against sin and injustice; people like Samuel, Huldah, Amos, or Jeremiah.

Then Jesus asks a much more critical question: "But who do you say that I am?" The disciples had been with Jesus for a while now, listened to him teach, and watched him do some truly amazing things. So what did they think? Who is Jesus, really? Simon Peter nails it. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus is pleased with this answer and blesses Peter. He states that Peter had not come to this conclusion on his own, but that God had revealed this to him. Jesus says that on this "rock" he will build his church, and you probably remember that this is a pun, because the word for "rock" in Greek sounds like the name Peter.

This brings us to our text for this morning. Immediately following this great confession of Peter, Jesus begins to explain to the disciples what is about to happen. He is going to go to Jerusalem where he will be arrested, tortured and then die on a cross.

Our text says that Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Now, I confess that in the past when I have read this I have been rather hard on Peter. He had just made this amazing statement of faith that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, so why is he arguing with Jesus. But if you think about it, Peter was being very logical. Take it statement by statement. Statement one: Jesus is God's Anointed One, the very essence of God in human form. Statement two: This Jesus intends go to Jerusalem specifically for the purpose of being arrested and put to death. Now, in Peter's experience, messiahs do not deliberately walk into traps so they can be killed. Therefore, statement three: Either Jesus is not the messiah, or he is wrong about going to Jerusalem. To Peter's credit he is not willing to give up on his confession. He knows that Jesus is indeed the Christ. So the only conclusion he can come to is that Jesus is wrong about going to Jerusalem. It is all very logical.

Now, the response Jesus gives is rather harsh, but sometimes that is what has to be done to get through to someone. Jesus calls Peter “Satan” and accuses him of blocking his way. It is rather a shock to hear Jesus say that, so much so that we skim over what he says next, “for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” You are using human intellect, human logic, Peter, and it doesn’t work. From a human point of view, the best you can say is that it is a paradox. God’s Anointed One is indeed fully God and yet at the same time is going to suffer a very painful human death.

But then Jesus goes on to say something even more paradoxical. He says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Down through the ages, theologians and scholars have wondered about what Jesus means when he says take up your cross and follow me. I can tell you of some of the things it does not mean. When someone is facing difficulties, they are sometimes told that this is the cross they have to bear. That is not right. Battling cancer, kidney stones, or severe acne is not taking up your cross. Working through a divorce, losing your job, or having financial problems is not taking up your cross. Coping with a mean spirited mother-in-law, an unfaithful spouse, or a rebellious teenager is not taking up your cross. You do not endure any of these things in order to follow Jesus. You endure these things as part of life. You do not take up these things. You do not choose these things. They just happen. God can and will give you strength and comfort in dealing with such things. You may gain great spiritual insights through such difficulties. But that is not what Jesus meant when he said his followers were to take up their cross.

So what was Jesus saying? Some say he is calling for absolute and complete devotion. As you know, at the time, the Jewish nation was under the control of the Roman Empire. There were groups of Jewish resistant fighters. Today the Romans would call them terrorists, but at the time they were called the Zealots. One of the twelve, the other man named Simon, was called a Zealot, and probably connected with these fighters in some way. If the Romans caught a Zealot, they crucified him to send a message of intimidation to anyone who might even be thinking of rebelling. If you resist us you will be crucified. This strategy worked in other parts of the empire, but not in Judea. The Zealots’ response was, “Bring it on!” It became their slogan or battle cry. “Take up your cross!” In other words, “Do your worst, Rome! Go ahead and crucify us! We are not afraid. We will not be intimidated. We will fight you, defy you and resist you until we breathe our last breath. We are more than willing to take up the cross.”

Some say this is what Jesus had in mind when he wanted his followers to take up their cross. They were to be as devoted to him as the Zealots were to their cause. This could very well be the case. In the years that followed many of those who claimed Jesus as their Lord and Savior clearly had this kind of devotion, as the Roman Empire persecuted Christians, imprisoning and executing many.

But I said that every preacher stands in the pulpit on Sunday morning with dozens of questions swirling around inside. While I certainly hope that I would be as devoted as those who faced persecution for their faith, I can’t help but wonder if I would be able to endure that kind of suffering. If I am honest, I have to say that I don’t know. Until I faced such pressure it is hard to say. Frankly, the thought of a cross, the thought of suffering for Jesus is a frightening prospect. It is not something I want to pursue.

But as I was pondering this, I thought again of that little poem by Michael Luenig that I read in my sermon last week, “Love and Fear.” Do you remember how it went?

There are only two feelings, Love and fear:
There are only two languages, Love and fear:
There are only two activities, Love and fear:
There are only two motives, two procedures,
two frameworks, two results, Love and fear,
Love and fear.

In 1st John 4:8 it says, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...” What would give me the courage to endure any kind of suffering? There is only one thing I can think of and that is love. I will readily admit that I am a wimp, a chicken, a weakling. I do not like anything painful or difficult. But if something was threatening someone I love, I would not back down. I would endure any kind of suffering, even to death, if doing so would save one of my granddaughters. I would do it in a heartbeat. There are only two feelings, Love and fear. There are only two languages, Love and fear. When you are empowered by love, fear disappears.

Jesus goes on to say, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Again, at first it seems paradoxical. It is basic survival to try to save your own life. Everything inside tells you to watch your back, do what you have to do to get by to survive; fight or flight. It is basic animal instinct... Unless... Unless love is a factor.

We have all been overwhelmed this week with the stories and pictures coming out of the Houston area and the devastation caused by Hurricane Harvey. One of the most heart wrenching stories was the one of Colette Sulcer, a surgical nurse from Beaumont, TX. On Tuesday afternoon, Colette and her three-year-old daughter, Jordyn, were in their car, trying to escape the rising flood waters. Their car became submerged and so Colette got Jordyn out and tried to carry her back to solid ground. But the current swept them both away. Witnesses say they saw Colette holding Jordyn up so she could breathe. The water carried them for more than a half a mile and it would be hours before a rescue boat could get to them. By the time rescuers arrived Colette had drowned. Little Jordyn was shivering but alive, clinging to her momma. Colette Sulcer’s love for her daughter overcame all her survival instincts. Like any loving mother or father, she was willing to let her life go, in order that her daughter would be saved. And I think we can say that Colette was a woman of faith, for later on when relatives came to pick up Jordyn at the hospital she told them, “Mama was saying her prayers.” Those prayers were answered for Jordyn is going to be all right.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...” That is what Jesus was trying to tell his disciples. He was going to Jerusalem, knowing full well what would happen, but he was not afraid. Love was taking him there and when Peter tries to stand in the way, Jesus will have none of it. “Take up your cross,” he says. Face the very thing that frightens you the most. Don’t do it out of some sort of macho bravado. Don’t do because of some sort of logical mental process. Don’t do it out of guilt or a sense of duty or obligation. Do it because I love you and you love me. Let my love flow into you and through you and out into this sad and sinful world. Because when you do, when you are willing to let go of life itself because of love, then there is absolutely nothing to be afraid of. It is only when you lose your life in my love that you will really be able to find it. There is nothing paradoxical about that. When we are filled with the love of God that we see in Jesus, when that love touches us deep into our hearts, then and only then does it make perfect sense. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.