



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – March 11, 2007 Comfortable or Glorious? You Choose
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Matthew 16:21-28

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

21From 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. 22And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23But 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." 24Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

The Cross and Self-Denial

25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For 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? 27"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. 28Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Romans 12:9-21

Marks of the True Christian

9Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." 21Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Peter always seemed to live a life of extremes. He never did anything tepidly or cautiously. He was always either on a spiritual mountaintop or in Jesus' doghouse. Today's Gospel lesson is an example of the latter. Just previously in Matthew's narrative Peter declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah – certainly a spiritual mountaintop for anyone - and here, a few sentences later, we find him telling Jesus that Jesus can't possibly be right about what the future holds for him. As Jesus entered his last days on earth he spent time preparing his disciples for the difficult time that lay ahead as well as the hope and promise of the resurrection. Peter seems only to have heard the parts about hardship and suffering and not to have heard the part about the resurrection. So as Jesus was teaching about these things Peter took it upon himself to pull Jesus aside and tell him he had to be wrong about what he was saying – Jesus couldn't possibly know what he was talking about. After all, a Messiah doesn't lose, a Messiah wins. Jesus reacted strongly to Peter's words. He called Peter "Satan" and commanded Peter to leave him alone because he's getting in the way of what Jesus came to earth to do. Now there is a very real possibility that Jesus reacted so violently to Peter's words because, without Peter's knowledge, this was a last ditch attempt by Satan to derail God's plans, an evil try at tempting and seducing the Son of God and his closest followers to ditch this crucifixion- fight the ultimate battle against good and evil stuff and have the good life his God-power could attain him. After all, Satan had tried temptation before why wouldn't he try it again in the days right before the culmination of God's plan. So Jesus had to practice ultimate self-denial, summon all that was within him to fight off this powerful attempt at seduction and temptation coming from the mouth of someone in his inner circle of confidants.

There is also the possibility that while Satan used Peter's words to tempt Jesus there was also something in Peter's words of concern for himself. Most likely Jesus' warning words of what was to come were stark

and scary. And he was probably straight with the disciples about the prospect that they were in line to participate in some of this suffering and difficulty that lay ahead. Maybe Peter's words to Jesus were an attempt at personal denial or self-protection. After all, if these things weren't really going to happen to Jesus then they weren't really going to happen to Peter, either.

Then, Jesus turned to the rest of the disciples and delivered his very familiar to us teaching on the need for self-denial and life loss for those who choose to follow the Son of God. And, the reality was that Jesus could speak about this with serious clarity because he was about to literally lose his life. For Jesus, these words were not metaphorical in any sense. Death and martyrdom were around the corner for Jesus and, ultimately, for some of the disciples. And when these words were passed onto the persecuted and martyred early church they probably gave them courage to face the trials and horrors that came their way.

But what do these words of Jesus have to say to us today? While there are, indeed, places in our world where public solidarity with Jesus means death and persecution that is not the case in our world. Oh, people might laugh us or feel strong emotion about views a Christian might hold, but few of us are in real danger of being arrested, interrogated, tortured or killed because we say we believe in Jesus. So how are we, in our present context, to understand and take seriously these words of Jesus to his disciples?

Unmistakably these are words about self-denial and words expressing a paradox. How is it that if we want to gain our lives we must lose them first? First, I want to be clear that I don't believe that Jesus is talking about asceticism. I don't think Jesus wants us to deny ourselves the good things God has given us in this world. If God had not wanted us, the human creation, to enjoy the good things of this world God would not have given them to us. God gave us the briny smell of the ocean, the sweet taste of sugar, the smooth feel of silk, the sight of ducks flying over a lake, and the pleasing sounds of music. God created this world for enjoyment – but sin has bent even those good things God gave us. And this means that sometimes we humans get overly caught up in the pleasures and pains of life and get overly caught up in, obsessed with, ourselves to the exclusion of those who

populate our personal worlds and those who are not as fortunate as we are. When Jesus talks about denying self he's talking about living a life focused on others rather than a life focused on one's self. Just giving up things doesn't make one a Christian – but loving God and others does. And in the long run it's easier to give up things than to really love other people. Theologian Frederick Bruner says, "Jesus is not anti-our-life; he is anti-preoccupation with our life."

So, how do we then live? How do we break out from our prison of self-absorption and live in community with each other and as Jesus' disciples in our world? Our epistle lesson from Romans give us some ideas about how to live unselfishly, how to make life about other people and not about ourselves. It's almost as if Paul gives us a laundry list of how not to live the self-involved life. I've divided his ideas about the unselfish life into 4, somewhat artificial and overlapping, but I think, helpful categories. First, Paul talks of loving other people – the hallmark, as Jesus told his disciples, of someone who professes to walk with God and Jesus. Love must be genuine. Don't even try to fake it, Paul says, because you'll never be able to live with others in God's way if your love is not real. And you must love with affection. To have affection for someone means to have tender feelings or a fondness for another. So this love is not about simply gritting your teeth and getting through a two hour meeting with someone who punches all your buttons and makes you absolutely crazy – but about being fond of that person, too. It's about finding the lovable qualities in a person despite that person's foibles and peccadilloes. I suspect this was as difficult for the apostle Paul as it is for some of us. And you show this genuine love not by just nodding assent as you hear these words or saying the words out loud – you show this love by your actions. So, Paul says, if some in your faith community are needy, help them out. And, you must never ever think you're better than someone else. You work to live in harmony and peace with other people and you never take the serving of vengeance or revenge upon yourself. This is God's job. Now, I don't think this means you always sit passively and let others who don't take these words of Paul seriously take advantage of you. I don't think this means that God's family is made up of a bunch of worn out doormats imprinted with the footprints of the stronger and more politically agile. But when there is a conflict, when you are treated badly by someone, when you find it difficult to agree with a decision or idea,

what it means is that you handle the matter with that genuine love and respect you exhibit for others and not react out of self-involved anger or hurt. Last, Paul tells us loving others means that you rejoice with others when good things happen to them, rather than being jealous or envious. And you share the sorrow with those same people when bad things happen, because even those who look the most fortunate from the outside may be carrying deep trouble and sadness on the inside.

My second category is simply about evil and Paul tells us to hate it – but never to repay one evil with another. And the thing is when we are always intentional about thinking about what the loving action in a certain situation would be, when we're not thinking about how this situation ultimately affects us and our interests, it is more difficult for evil to triumph. When we truly work at loving other people, it does make it more difficult for us to wish them evil or plot for their demise or the demise of their dreams. And, Paul also tells us that we should not be overcome by evil. We shouldn't let the evil present in our world extinguish our hope for a better future or stop us from loving God and trusting in God's faithfulness to us.

Good, the opposite of evil, is the third category. Just as we are to hate evil, we are to embrace what is good. We do this by loving others, serving God, being hopeful, practicing patience through the difficult times, and always praying, no matter what. A long time ago, Edith Schaffer, the wife of theologian and philosopher, Francis Schaffer wrote a book called Affliction. In this book she attempted to answer the hard questions surrounding the pain and suffering of our world. Now it's been a long time since I've read this book but the part that always stuck with me was her idea that when we deal with difficult and evil circumstances in our lives it is not just our personal battle – but a battle that takes on cosmic significance in the battle of good versus evil that wages daily around us. And how we deal with those difficult or temptation filled circumstances affects these battles of good and evil – what we do, the choices we make, have not just personal significance but cosmic consequences as well. So when we choose to embrace good by not being self-involved, doing the loving thing, by persevering through difficult circumstances, by continuing to

hope in Jesus' words, and by calling the power of a good God into all circumstances we are actually in our own small way hammering the nails in the coffin of evil. We can never underestimate the power of good in our lives, in our world, and in our universe.

The fourth and last category outlines how we are to deal with the stranger and our enemies. And too often in today's world they are one in the same. We see any stranger as our enemy. So what does Paul say about how people who embrace living in the power of love and goodness should treat strangers? He says we should extend them hospitality, treat them as guests and be kind, generous, and cordial with them. Not the way we usually think of treating strangers, especially strangers who look a little different from us, live a little differently than we do, or hold different beliefs than we do. The health club I frequented in Minnesota employed many immigrants to this country to do the cleaning. And I noticed that the clientele of the club, myself included, tended to treat them as if they are invisible. God gently told me that it was not right to treat these people as if they were less than human or non-existent. So I began to make eye-contact with them and to smile more frequently, at least acknowledging to them they are part of the world. And you know what, they smile back. It's not much, I know – but it is a step toward the hospitality toward strangers Paul speaks of. And then, even more outrageously Paul says that people who live in love and goodness should treat their enemies well. He says we should bless those who make trouble for us. If your enemy is hungry, feed him or her or if your enemy is thirsty, give your enemy something to drink. It seems this will bother your enemy more than if you take revenge. This loving treatment of enemies rubs against our current cultural grain of an eye for an eye and of hit first at your enemies before they get you. But it's a theme of God's story that runs from Old Testament to New Testament.

So taking up your cross, denying yourself can mean embracing an other-centered life of love and goodness. This sounds deceptively simple. But, we don't live in a world that values genuine love and goodness in the name of self-denial. And if we were to live Paul's words literally we would make some people in our personal and professional orbits unhappy, incredulous, and, perhaps, dangerously angry. Which brings me to one caveat about the interpretation of Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew I've given you this morning. Taking

up one's cross, denying oneself, living an other involved life rather than a self-involved life can be dangerous. For when we stop looking inward – when we stop making everything about us and what we want, what we think would be good for us – we begin to notice that despite all the good things God has given us we live in an ugly world. We notice that there is injustice and oppression toward women and children and people who think and believe differently. We notice that millions of people in this world go to sleep hungry each night. We notice that not many people ever “turn the other cheek” when threatened or attacked. We notice that that person who rubs us the wrong way is more than just an obstruction to us getting what we want, but that she is a person created in God's image, loved by God, and a person with a great need to be loved just as each of us have. And when we begin to notice these things we begin to feel the need to take action that usually means disturbing the status quo. And when we disturb the status quo people get angry with us because we're disrupting the illusionary safety of their own self-involved lives and we make them uncomfortable. And as we've seen over and over again through history this disruption of the status quo and the comfort of the powerful can result in martyrdom. After all, that's what happened to Jesus. But like Jesus – we too have the hope of the resurrection, the vision of the new heaven and the new earth when the power of good has triumphed forever and the lion lies down with the lamb. And, when we remember that we are a people who will live forever, perhaps, it becomes easier to let go of ourselves in this world.

Throughout this week I've discussed the topic of this sermon with several people and each time I've said that I'm preaching about the curse of self-absorption I've been quick to say that I'm saying these words as much to myself this morning as to you. We live in a culture that champions and extols “me” first or “my family” first, so it's difficult not to be self-involved. And learning how to be other occupied rather than self-occupied is a process and an intentional one, at that. It goes against the grain of our human nature. But Jesus does say that this is a characteristic of his followers and it's difficult to find any other way around those words and make them mean something else. Believe me, I tried.

When I was in college I was very “into” the British fantasy writers who used lots of Christian symbolism. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are perhaps the best known of that group. But perhaps the writer of that ilk who most intrigued me was Charles Williams. He wrote somewhat obtuse novels dealing with ordinary people who had extraordinary, fanciful things happen to them. In one of his novels a young man is trying to persuade a woman to marry him. She is resistant. He counters her reticence with the words “If you marry me, you may not be comfortable, but you might be glorious.” When we follow Jesus we lose our life in order to gain and we may not be comfortable but we might be glorious.

Amen.