

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 16:21-28

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<sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” <sup>23</sup> 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.” <sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> 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? <sup>27</sup> “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. <sup>28</sup> 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.”

This is the word of the Lord

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Joshua 24:1-2, 14-15

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Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. <sup>2</sup>And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.

<sup>14</sup>“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup>Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

This is the word of the Lord.

## ***“Following Jesus into Life”***

*“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mt 16 24).* These words don’t sound as sweet to our ears as some of the others Jesus said, do they? (e.g. *“Come to me all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28), “I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Mt 28:30). “Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your lord.” (Mt 25:21)* What could Jesus have meant when he said this? Surely, he didn’t mean that to be his followers, we need to put ourselves down all the time and take every shortcut to our graves, did he?<sup>1</sup>

Well, to answer that question, we need to back up a bit and review the context. Jesus and his disciples were in Caesarea Philippi which was a predominantly Gentile city and they had retreated from the crowds for some “alone” time. He asked them who they thought he was, and Peter gave one of the most beautiful professions of faith in Scripture. While most thought Jesus a prophet, Peter said, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* Jesus then told Peter that he was the rock, Petros, the rock on which he’d build his church. It was a good day for Peter.

But Peter’s head-of-the-class status did not last very long. The rock became a stumbling block. This is because when Jesus began to show his disciples that he would be soon arrested, crucified and raised again from the dead, Peter impulsively rebuked Jesus. Peter had obviously been counting on Jesus leading a march on Jerusalem, taking over the Temple and assuming the role as Messiah, King. He couldn’t imagine that his beloved leader would knowingly be arrested and crucified, would knowingly walk into a situation of suffering and certain death. Peter said, *“God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”*

This is when Jesus sharply corrected Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are not on the side of God but of men.”* Certainly, Peter and the other disciples must have wondered what he’d done wrong. He was just saying out loud what everyone was probably thinking. But Jesus used words he’d used when tempted in the wilderness by the evil one. Barbara Brown Taylor

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor. *“Risking Life. Matthew 16:21-28: In: The Seeds of Heaven.* (Louisville: WJKP; 75-81.

explains it this way, “*Peter was, as far as Jesus was concerned, Satan talking, the ancient tempter, who from the beginning of time has offered humankind alternatives to the will of God...easier, safer, flashier alternatives...all of them for us to do and be something other than what God has called us to do and be. In this case, the temptation for Jesus by Peter was to skip the trip to Jerusalem and find another way to save the world...without placing himself at risk.*”<sup>2</sup>

This then is the context prior to Jesus saying those curious words about us denying ourselves and picking up crosses. So, what did he mean? (*repeat*) Well...it seems that once again, Jesus is saying that the divine perspective on the world is upside down, backwards from how we see it, and that we need begin to have this perspective if we are going to call ourselves disciples.

Do you recall Paul telling the church in Corinth in his 1<sup>st</sup> letter to them (the one we read last week) that “we see now in a mirror dimly, but THEN we shall see face to face”? Well, some day we will look at things as does God, but at present, we, humans, see things as a mirror-image world in which everything is backwards or opposite. For instance, when thinking about “life”, we think of the state of continuing breath and body functioning, but God is thinking about the quality, the depth and breadth, the gusto of our living. And when we, humans, then think about the quality of our lives, we think of it in terms of the amount of power, beauty, fame, wealth, and happiness we have. And we know that we get these things by self-promoting, dominating, controlling, competing, accumulating stuff. Just consider some of our societal mantras.

“*Believe in yourself*”, “*It’s a dog eat dog world*,” “*The one with the most toys wins*,” “*He who has the gold makes the rules*,” “*Don’t get mad, get even*,” “*Get while the getting’s good*,” “*Might makes right*,” “*Sometimes you have to drown the puppies*” This is all, all, antithetical to God’s perspective. (*pause*) NT Wright says our CHRISTIAN perspective on the world is like Alice’s in “*Alice through the Looking Glass*”. In order to get somewhere, Alice must go in the opposite direction.<sup>3</sup>

God’s definition of life, abundant life, is a Christ-like, outward looking life. It is not lived by saving it, but spending it, giving it away, as did Jesus. It cannot be shut up and saved any

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Wright. *Matthew for Everyone. Part 2.* (Louisville: WJKP; 2002), 9-11.

more than a bird can be put in a shoebox and stored on a closet shelf.<sup>4</sup> Frederick Beuchner says it well, *“Journeying through life for the sake of saving our own robs us of joy and causes us to cease living in any sense that really matters. Journeying instead for the world’s sake, for Christ’s sake---even when the world scares or sickens us half to death---little by little makes us come alive.”*<sup>5</sup>

*You know, this week we’ve all seen countless examples of people who are living abundantly, seeing the world from a divine perspective, picking up their crosses and following Jesus. They may not have known exactly who it is that beckoned them and was ahead of them, but yet they’ve answered the call and come. They’ve selflessly given millions of dollars and contributed an abundance of needed items to the victims of Hurricane Harvey. (You’ve been part of this). They’ve used boats of every kind and shape, jet skis, floats, pontoons, helicopters, dump trucks, and even horses, to rescue people and pets from their flooded homes. They’ve cried with, comforted and encouraged the traumatized evacuees. You’ve seen the pictures... women drying each other’s eyes, soldiers rocking newborn babies, an elderly man pulling somebody’s puppy from a bush, a human chain stretching from the water’s edge to a submerged car, an anonymous “spider man” visiting children in shelters, evacuees breaking out in prayerful song. Oh, what grace amidst the sorrow. It’s God’s way, isn’t it? It’s the kind of life that we are intended to have! (pause) Out of the many interviews and videos shown, I was moved especially by one in which a young man, wet, wearing a T-shirt and a baseball cap, said, as he choked back tears, “Well, it is difficult to NOT help. You see the need and devastation. You feel it inside. Umm. I closed my company. I spent what I had. I just came.” I’ve heard it said that following Jesus will cost us everything and it will give us everything!!!*

Brothers and sisters, we certainly CAN keep breathing and spend our life’s time being afraid, being safe, too cautious to stick out our necks, too comfortable to take risks for Jesus. We CAN guard our days as though they’re our possessions, not leaving our houses, or answering the door very much. Even a church can spend its days worrying about who to let in

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor.

<sup>5</sup>Frederick Buechner. *The Sacred Journey*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1982), 107.

and fretting about what to give money to, about what people will think! We CAN still move and have our being, while fearing suffering and death, but this kind of living turns into a stinginess which isn't really living...not living at all. You see, living by fearing suffering and death only results in what...suffering and death....not accomplishing much and dying anyway.

*When I was in my late 40's, I felt a call to go to seminary. I was frankly afraid...afraid of a lot of things (cost, change, sacrifice of my family), but one of the biggest fears was not being able to hold up to the rigor of being a student, of trying to study and take tests again. My brain was not as sharp as it was. I was getting older. Of course, many people encouraged me, but the most strengthening words came from our church organist. She said, "Naomi, what are you afraid of...being 50 when you go? Well, what will you be if you don't go? 50".*

What Christ meant with those words, those sweet, comforting, empowering, wonderful words, "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,*" ...what he meant is that when we choose to follow him, we follow him not into death, but into life, REAL life. We live a life that yes, is backwards from that of the world around us, but it's one that matters, one which pours itself out "as a matter of course", which considers the Other first, which spends without counting the cost. We live a life which orients itself around the part of Jesus' words which Peter missed, the part about Jesus being raised on the third day. We live a life that will never end, not really, because when our time ends here, the living, resurrected Lord will have more life for us, there. Friends, my prayer this day and every day is that you and I are guided to deny ourselves, pick up our crosses and...really live! Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ! Amen.