



“The Challenge”

Matthew 16:21-28

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, September 18, 2011

What does it mean for Jesus to be the Messiah and what demands does he make on my life? These are two basic questions each of us must answer. If you're not feeling a bit unnerved – if you're not feeling at least a tinge of anxiety – you didn't quite catch today's Scripture reading. The answers to these two questions are revealed in today's passage. But beware: when we wrestle with this text, we discover that the answers are not especially attractive.

Today's passage is a difficult, yet crucial one if we attempt to follow Christ. Make no mistake; there are terrific benefits to committing your life to the one who was constantly filled with God's Spirit. It opens up a world of possibilities adding passion, pleasure and purpose to your life. But do not be deceived. There are also considerable challenges. In our passage, Jesus informs his followers that he has incredibly high expectations.

To grasp the context, it helps to know that immediately prior to our passage, Jesus quizzed his disciples. He asked if they truly understood who he is. Peter stood up and boldly declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus was beaming; Peter nailed it! Jesus said to Peter, “Blessed are you and I will build my church on you.” However, to insure that Peter and the others understood what kind of Messiah he was, Jesus followed up with a sobering sermon.

Today's passage begins: “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...” Jesus knew that remaining faithful to God did not guarantee a trouble-free life. Rather, it meant he must endure ongoing conflict with those in power. This was the first occasion when Jesus spelled out to his followers the inevitable result of his intense opposition to the religious and political leaders in Jerusalem. Jesus angered those in power and was all too aware that his opponents were formidable and unforgiving. He knew they would not relinquish their authority voluntarily but would fight furiously to maintain control.

I do not think Jesus believed God had concocted a scheme for people to murder him; God wanted people to follow him. But Jesus knew that his collision course with the ruling elite would undoubtedly provoke them to use every weapon in their arsenal to silence him and Jesus wanted anyone who threw their lot in with him to know what to expect.

Peter, having been so right just moments before when naming Jesus as the Messiah, now demonstrates that he is so wrong in comprehending what that means. When Peter declared Jesus was the Messiah, he was thinking glory, not suffering; vindication, not humiliation; victory, not defeat.

Jesus so completely shattered Peter's vision that Peter lashed out at Jesus, rebuking his teacher for the ominous picture he painted. Peter was in such denial about the way rulers respond to reformers that he implied that Jesus had lost his mind.

In a harsh exchange, Jesus flared at Peter, calling him Satan and warning him to get out of the way. Jesus made it clear to his disciples that he was setting his sights on the power brokers in Jerusalem despite the fact that once he marched through the gates of that walled city, opposition was inevitable. He was ready to take on the religious and political authorities who had twisted the faith to their benefit and they would fight him to the finish. It would be a bloody battle and they would succeed.

Peter protested, "It can't be that way!" Maybe he argued with Jesus because he could not imagine such defeat. Or, perhaps he was afraid that if Jesus spelled out the future in such harrowing terms, his followers would peel off before they ever reached Jerusalem and Jesus would be walking through those gates alone.

Jesus did not back down. He told Peter that he had better step aside, because he was beginning to sound a lot like Satan, attempting to lure people along with glittering, but false, promises rather than the stark truth.

Jesus looked each one of them in the eyes and spelled it out. If you follow me, your family might disown you. Friends will think you've lost your mind, opponents will abuse you and enemies will toss you in jail and worse. If you follow me, you'll have to lug your own cross because self-sacrifice, not self-indulgence, is the path to an abundant life.

And as crazy as it sounds, some of them said, "Where do I sign up?" They walked away from the family business, ignored the ire of their friends, let go of their comfortable routines and risked it all to follow him.

I hope that each of us has at least a touch of that same craziness. I hope that each of us is gutsy enough to risk following where Jesus leads us. United Methodist Bishop, William Willimon, says that if there is anything worse than not reaching your goals, it is setting them too low and reaching them.

We can live a happy and comfortable life, but Christ calls us to something more: a *worthy* life. He summons us to a fascinating life, a compelling life; a life that refuses to settle for nothing more than like-minded friends and financial security. He's talking adventure!

But to embark on an adventure, you have to take some risks. You cannot simply do things the way everyone else does them or the way you have always done them.

We live in an age where people are hesitant to make commitments. Whether it is "Yes, I will come to that event" or "Yes, I will serve in that capacity," they fail to make promises because they're always on the lookout for a more appealing invitation.

Some believe they can have just a pinch of faith and still be a follower of Christ. Some think that they can simply live a decent life and that's all that is expected of them. They may say that they are spiritual, but not religious.

In our day, many think that spirituality signifies time alone in the garden reflecting on a passage of Scripture and praying. That's only a fraction of a spiritual life. Jesus would occasionally withdraw from people and spend time alone with God, but after those private

moments, he always marched back into a hurting world to give himself away for others. That's our model.

People say they are spiritual, but not religious because they convince themselves that it's unnecessary to demonstrate their commitment to Christ by actually joining the church, giving financially to the church and serving in some ministry. Today's passage exposes such anemic faith as an imposter. Jesus does not say, "I hope that among all of your commitments, you'll be able to carve out a little time for me, too." He is blunt and to the point. He says, "Deny yourself, take up your 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."

Many of the first responders to the 9/11 terrorist attacks understood what he meant. They were able to dash into those burning towers because they were not focused on themselves. Their eyes were on the needs at their doorstep and they responded as Christ would.

There were numerous stories of gallant actions where people risked their lives for others. Last week I heard Terry Gross interviewing Jay Jonas, a New York City firefighter who miraculously survived the collapse of the World Trade Center. He said he doesn't like it when people say that the reason he survived was because God was with him. He said by saying that, it implies that God was not with all those who perished, but he's certain – as I am – that God was with them too.

He told of a radio transmission between Fire Chief Pete Haden and Captain Paddy Brown. It was the only transmission he heard as he was trying to get the men under his command down the stairs. Chief Hayden called Captain Brown on the radio, "Command Post to Ladder 3, get out of the building. Get out of the building." And Paddy Brown got on the radio and said, "I refuse the order." Jonas said that doesn't happen. You don't disobey an order. But he heard Paddy Brown say, "I refuse the order. I'm up here on the 44<sup>th</sup> floor and I've got too many burned people with me. I'm not leaving them."

And he did not. You have to wonder if, somewhere in his heart, these words were ringing out: "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

God does not expect each of us to achieve such eye-popping results. But God challenges us – individually and as the body of Christ – to give ourselves for the wellbeing of others. We are to sacrifice some of our time and a portion of our wealth. We are to weep with those who mourn and sweat with those who struggle. We are to sit patiently and listen to those who need to be heard and carve out time to feed people who are desperate for a meal. We are to be a friend to someone who is feeling lost or alone, to lend our support to a friend who is in distress, and to encourage our policy-makers to work not for the interests of a few, but for the common good.

Instead of ignoring people who are poor or avoiding a friend with problems, we are to make ourselves vulnerable, as Jesus did, by befriending people in trouble and figuring out how we can help. It will cost us money and time, it may cost us friends and social status but this is the path Christ calls us to forge because it is the road to a rich and rewarding existence.

We enrich our lives when we sacrifice for others, we overcome our insecurities when we focus on someone else's pain, and we spawn a grateful heart when we reach out our hand. This is precisely why our church family houses homeless guests, feeds people who are hungry, builds affordable housing, drives people to doctors' appointments, fills backpacks with school supplies for low income children, provides Stephen Ministers' for people who mourn, helps rebuild New Orleans, prays for the families of those killed in service to our country, supports mission efforts in Guatemala, Congo and Kenya, supports peacemaking efforts in Israel/Palestine, seeks to preserve God's creation for future generations, extends care to abused women, financially

supports homeless ministries, gives academic scholarships and Christmas boxes, provides meeting space for recovering addicts, programs to improve parenting skills and after school mentoring.

If you make a courageous commitment to following Christ, you will discover neither a soft life nor an easy life. But you will find a life with depth and meaning, a life of love and satisfaction, a life of joy and hope, and the deep abiding peace in your soul that comes when your life is in harmony with our Creator. It's your call.