

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2009  
Lessons: Genesis 17:1-8,15-16 and Mark 8:31-38

## THE ROAD WE ARE CALLED TO TAKE

Have I set a trap for myself and stepped into it? In last Sunday's sermon, contrasting the positive message of Jesus with the threatening, fear-inducing message of John the Baptist, I said this:

Jesus also calls people *to repent*, to turn, but he emphasizes what is coming, what is new, what is liberating and life-giving. He tells people what to turn *toward*. The kingdom of God is coming and is already at hand for those who can see it. His is good news, gospel, not mere warning, but promise. In the Bible, change starts with promise, not mandate.

Following the apostle Paul,<sup>1</sup> I offered Abraham and Sarah as the models for this gospel of promise, and in this morning's reading from Genesis, we see them again as just that— models for God's way of calling people leave the old behind (the old name, the old life) and journey toward the new, not by threatening them or making them feel guilty and ashamed, but by becoming their God and promising them life that is better, freer, and vibrant with hope and trust in God's love.<sup>2</sup>

But today we hear Jesus telling us that if we are going to follow him, we need to take the way of the cross. We must deny ourselves and let go of our lives. Suddenly, it sounds as though we are walking, not into the light of a brighter future, but into the darkness of the unknown and ominous. The good feeling of relief is waning as hope constricts again and new fears grip us. Jesus warns:

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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

This morning I ask you to confront this call with me, what it requires of us and what it does not require. The first thing I contend it does not require is that we return to a religion of fear, shame, guilt, and self-disgust, as though we had no God who loves us and no Savior who gave himself for us to give us life as God's own beloved people.

My second contention is that Jesus is not telling us to go looking for trouble. We are not called to seek persecution or take pride in people's negative reactions to our gospel. One bishop in the early church who had been arrested implored his fellow Christians not to intervene on his behalf with the Roman authorities, lest he be denied his opportunity to die for the faith.<sup>3</sup> That's twisted. Jesus himself did not seek death or long for it. In Gethsemane, he prays for another way if there is one he can take without abandoning the will and purpose of God, which is to rescue and redeem people and to reclaim this world as God's beloved creation.

To this day, Christians misinterpret both Jesus' call to take the way of the cross and other people's negative reactions to them and the gospel they represent. Some intrude into other people's lives, sticking the message right into their faces, and when they are rejected, consider that rejection a sign of their faithfulness to Christ and a fulfillment of the prophecy that Christians will be persecuted. So, rudeness and arrogance come to be regarded as marks of faithful discipleship. We might wish we could tell people sometimes, "No, they're not rejecting Christ or his gospel of salvation; they're rejecting you and your obnoxious intrusion into their lives." When Christians sound like judgmental know-it-alls or pushy salespeople peddling some quick and easy deal with big payoffs, they can expect to be rejected, avoided in the workplace, and dropped from other people's lists of friends. Jesus Christ has nothing to do with it, except that his name gets tossed around ad nauseam.

True, there are places on earth where Christians are indeed being persecuted and even slaughtered for being Christian. Some of them are struggling to be faithful to Jesus Christ, but even here we need to be careful about the conclusions we draw. In his book, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, Thomas Friedman remarks that the Christian faction in Lebanon during the 1980's was Christian in about the same sense the American Mafia was and just as murderous. Sometimes Christians are scorned or hated for following Jesus, but sometimes they are hated or feared for being a power group seeking to extend their control over a country. Certainly, there are Christian groups striving to expand their control over this country.

But we still need to hear and heed Jesus' disturbing insistence that we must deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow him. There is a choice to be made and not just once and done, but over and over again in many different circumstances as we live. *Will I take the way of Jesus, or will I follow an easier path that is not his way at all but my own without him?* Anyone who thinks such choices are easy has not begun making them.

Life continually presents us with alternatives to putting our trust in God and God's love for this world and striving to pursue God's vision for the way this world should be. Jesus calls that vision "the kingdom of God." It is the rule of God's self-giving love, and it finds strenuous opposition in a world committed to self-serving at the expense of others. This is the turning to which Jesus calls us: from self-serving at others' expense to self-giving

for others' sake. That is the way of the cross. The self-denial to which Jesus calls us requires a surrender of the ego, not to shame or self-hatred, but to trust *in God as God*, the One I cannot control but can only trust.

So, here it is, Sunday, March 8, 2009. As the morning has unfolded so far, I doubt that I will be making any life-changing choices today, although, of course, we never know. I am unlikely to be arrested for being a Christian minister. I am unlikely to be persecuted in any way for my faith. So, what is Jesus saying to me that matters on such an ordinary day? Having issued his call that we follow him in the way of the cross, Jesus asks a haunting question: *What would it benefit me to gain even the whole world but lose my soul? What will I give in exchange for my soul?*

I know, the version of the Bible in English we use most translates the rather familiar Greek word *psyche* as “life,” which is a valid and often helpful translation, but the core meaning of *psyche* is “soul.” Biblically, I do not just have a soul; I am one, all of me including my body, mind, and vitality. My soul is my own self, but it is my truest self — the person known to God and loved. It is the “who I am” at its most essential level. If I lose my soul, I lose my very self. It is possible for me to lose my soul and go on living, but then the life I live is no longer whole and real but broken and diminished, which means there are far worse possibilities than dying.

It is not my responsibility to keep my soul pure and unstained by life's messiness, a notion that would lead me back into legalism and obsession with my faults and those of my neighbor. It is my calling to trust God's love for me and go forward with what courage I can muster in the way of Jesus' self-giving love. What that love requires of me specifically on any given day is something I must continually seek to determine, not in fear or guilt, but in trust and hope. I need to keep understanding, however, that hope is just what the word says,<sup>4</sup> and sometimes I don't even know what I'm hoping for, but know only that I can trust God to make it worth the wait and the effort. Christianity that sells itself by promising people God will give them what they desire is lying and cheating. We are called to follow Jesus in pursuit of God's vision for the world and for human life, not our own desires for self-fulfillment. Put simply, God makes no promise to give me what's on my wish list. What God values is redemptive love — not power, not fame or prestige, not wealth or the good life of pleasure and convenience, but redemptive love, the kind of love that heals the human soul and not only for the individual, but the soul of the human community as well. Love is, after all, a very personal matter but not an individualistic one. As we learn our need for God's love, we also learn more and more our need for each other and so for healing in human society. Justice, integrity, and freedom are very much parts of redemptive love.

We do not go looking for trouble, nor do we glory in rejection. We are not returning to fear, shame, and guilt. Neither are we confusing God with Santa Claus who fills our wish

lists. Jesus is calling us to walk with him in commitment to God's redemptive love. Taking that road requires self-denial, for it is not the ego's favored choice. But it is the road to life, and along the way, without even realizing what is happening, we will find ourselves, our souls. Amen.

Notes:

1. See Romans chapter 4 and Galatians chapter 3.
2. God's renaming of Abram as Abraham and Sarai as Sarah represents the gift of new life and identity for them within the covenant God is making with them and their descendants, promising to give them the land and to be their God.
3. The bishop was Ignatius of Antioch who was martyred, apparently with the idea from the Roman side of setting an example that would intimidate Christians into renouncing their faith. If so, his execution backfired. The situation is complex. Letters are attributed to Ignatius which he surely did not write, and the accounts of his tortures are seemingly exaggerated. He seems to have taken "martyr" literally and faithfully as "witness" to the faith. But it seems clear also that he did not wish to be spared but only to have the faith and courage to make this final witness, desiring heaven more than earth.
4. See Romans 8:18-25.