

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for March 4, 2012  
Lessons: Genesis 17:1-7,15-16 and Mark 8:31-37

## KEEPING OUR SPINES

This reading from the gospel is difficult, not only because it goes against the grain of worldly thinking, but because it raises so many questions and has caused problems for so many believers, ranging from Christian belittling of women to the seeking of martyrdom for the glory of it. I could have made this sermon fifty pages long. Don't worry, I did not. I hope to encourage conversation, not conclude it.

There might seem to be two very different directions for Christian life. We might think we are hearing mixed messages. On one hand, Jesus heals the sick and broken, forgives the guilty and shameful, rescues the lost, and restores the outcast. He calls people to life and wholeness. For them, he is the bread of life, the light of the world, the living water. He has come "that they may have life and have it abundantly." He offers rest to the weary and relief to the overwhelmed.

Then, however, we come to our reading this morning. Now we hear Jesus saying that if I want to follow him, I must take up my cross and go his way. If I try to save my life, I will lose it. Only by giving up my life can I find it. For what does it benefit me to gain even the whole world – everything I could desire and more – if in so prospering, I lose my life, my soul, my very self? The word translated accurately in our version as "life" is a Greek term that is actually familiar to us: it is *psyche* as in psychology, the study of the soul – the self of the person. What, Jesus asks me, will I give in exchange for my soul, my life, the person I am? What good is it to achieve all my goals, attain all my desires, and win the admiration of all around me if by gaining so much, I lose myself?

We have misunderstood Jesus' question as referring only to the matter of getting into heaven when we die. We have under-interpreted the problem. Jesus is rejecting for himself the way of power his disciple, Simon Peter, has just urged him to take. *No, Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Christ of God; you cannot be made to suffer and be put to death. That must not happen to you. You must go the other way. Attain power. Win for God and the rule over the nation and over the world for God.* Harshly, Jesus has replied, "Get behind me, Satan!" but he not saying Simon Peter is himself the Prince of Darkness. Jesus is recognizing the source of such thinking and its power to corrupt the very best intentions. He has not come to rule and command, to take charge and order life God's way whether the people like it or

not. He will not establish a theocracy on earth, setting himself upon its throne to reign in power for God and order all things supposedly according to God's will.

If that kind of imposed goodness and order were all God wanted for humanity, there would never have been a struggle at all. If power to command and enforce compliance could achieve God's purpose, who could stand against the Almighty? If we could fulfill our stewardship as parents simply by telling our children what to do and forcing them to do it, how simple good parenting would be! But there is this thing called the human will. There is what Jesus here calls the soul, the very self of the person, which cannot be made by command or force the soul God created it to become. Why not? God's goals for the human soul are empathy, compassion, a love for justice and kindness, and a compelling desire for the good of the other person. Add to such core goals, God's insistence that the person be free to develop in his or her own unique ways to contribute to the spiritual, intellectual, artistic, and relational development of the community, and you have a much more complex set of problems than can be solved by command and enforcement.

God wants willing and joyful response from us, not grudging compliance, not unquestioning obedience, not self-effacing submission that has no spine. God does not want slaves to the divine will but partners in God's way of grace, compassion, and justice. God wants relationship with us, wants to be our God whom we rejoice inwardly as well as outwardly to know as our God. He wants us free to be ourselves.

Now, wait a minute. If God does not want from us self-effacing submission, why does Jesus say we must deny ourselves? Is that not the same thing? No, it is not. The problem, known as sin, is that the human ego tries to center life around itself in isolation from God and other people, thereby pretending to be its own little god. This isolation of the self within itself is the nature of sin. We think sin is wrongdoing, understandably enough because we see the harm it does to self and others, but we mistake the symptoms for the disease. So, we try to restrict sin with rules and regulations. Of course we fail, and sometimes we witness the petty meanness or brutal cruelty that self-congratulating adherence to the rules and regulations can produce in the human soul. The difference between petty meanness and brutal cruelty is the degree of power over others.

What, then, is the self-denial to which Jesus calls us? If it is not self-effacing submission, what is it?

In the world and in worldly religion that cloaks itself in piety, there is always a hierarchy of power of some over others – of authority and submission to authority. That's how the world works, which is the reason that traditionally within Christianity the word "submissive" has most often been followed by the word "woman." The truth is that the

alienated self lives in shame because it cannot possibly achieve the self-sufficiency it desires. We're not gods; we need the true God and we need each other. The ego that wants self-sufficiency hates the shame it feels because it is not self-sufficient. To counter that shame, it seeks pride through power over others, then assuages any guilt by being benevolent toward those over whom it exercises power. Just don't question that power or the sparks will fly. "You will do as I say and be as I tell you to be!" Jesus refuses to take that posture toward us. He is not driven by shame. He does not need the pride of power and authority over others. Yes, he is troubled by the sufferings and injustices of the world, and his compassion would provide the way that evil could get its hooks into him, by urging him to take power for the sake of relieving human suffering and setting things right. To that temptation he says, "No." Then, the die is cast. He must suffer and lay down his life.

Self-denial is rejection of sin's lie that the ego is independent and self-sufficient – the lie that we can live as our own gods, countering the shame of our weaknesses with the pride of power over others. I am free to be myself, but I am not at liberty to be my own god. The position of God is already filled. Really, self-denial is recognition of the truth about myself. I am a human being created to be loved by God and to share God's grace and compassion freely and respectfully with other human beings.

The boss has yelled at the husband. The husband comes home and yells at his wife. She yells at her child, who in turn yells at the younger sibling, who yells at the dog. Being a dog naturally programmed to be submissive to the leaders of the pack, the dog accepts full blame. God does not want us to be dogs but human beings created in God's image and likeness to live together free from the shame of weakness and the pride of power.

Jesus does not want to remove our spines. He does not want to be the alpha male leader of a pack of submissive dogs that nip at each other. Animals do that kind of thing. I have watched the supposedly peaceful doves in our back yard as the biggest spends its time chasing the others away instead of feeding from the seed on the ground. So one eats, and seed is left behind. Is that not a parable of human life in this world?

To follow Jesus, we must live his way, relating to God and other people his way. We don't need to seek suffering or martyrdom. We don't need to look for "persecution" by annoying people with our faith. What we need is to put our trust in him and so in God, letting go as God's Spirit enables us to let go of our ego's shame and pride, accepting our humanity as God's gift, learning to give without taking and serve without obligating others. For what would it benefit me to gain everything I might desire and more, if I lose God, other people, my humanity, and my very self, my soul? Jesus calls us out of the prison of our egos into the freedom of living in God's grace, letting ourselves be loved and learning to love in response. That's what it's all about. Amen.