

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2009
Lessons: Ruth 1:6-17 and John 12:23-28; 15:12-15

NOT TURNING BACK

Jesus' life matters. His teachings matter, too, and not just the fact that he taught the so-called "common people," but also the content of his teachings and their challenges to our assumptions about God and life and our practices in living. If it seems strange to you that a Christian minister would open a sermon by declaring that Jesus' life and teachings matter, as though there were an alternative Christian view, please understand that there really is an alternative Christian view that has been with us in various forms throughout the history of the church. Sometimes, this alternative view simply ignores Jesus' life and teachings, focusing all attention upon his death, resurrection, and ascension to glory. But modern dispensationalist inventions declare Jesus' life and teachings irrelevant to this "end time" in which we supposedly live. According to these very popular end-time fantasies, the Sermon on the Mount *should* be ignored because its time has passed (or, in a variation, has not yet come). These days apparently Christians should not love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them but should, rather, be busy preparing for war and praying for the destruction of Christ's enemies. Humility is out; belligerence, it seems, is the new and right spirit. Wow! How far we have departed from Jesus of Nazareth – so far, indeed, that I cannot recognize the belligerent Christ of end-time Christianity as Jesus at all.

We do not, however, have to look to the extreme of dispensationalism to find Jesus separated from his own life and teachings. The Apostles' Creed says nothing about Jesus' life or his teachings, but skips from his birth to his suffering under the authority of Pontius Pilate, his crucifixion and death, his resurrection and ascension, and his future judgment of all people. Even the apostle Paul, in the letters we have that he wrote to Christian churches, says very little *directly* about Jesus' life and teachings, but Paul draws upon both.

Paul knows his gospel of Jesus Christ crucified for us and raised by God to be our hope and salvation cannot be separated from Jesus' life and teaching. He draws from Jesus the way life is to be lived in faith. That's why Paul gets so angry at the Corinthians: they are acting as though life in Christ did not have to be a *way of life* drawn from his way, lived as he lived. They seem to think faith has no content and Christian life no quality of love, humility, and service, but just a lot of good feelings and spiritual highs that change nothing.

So, I say again that Jesus' *way of life* matters, and we need to stop separating his appeal, "Believe in God, believe also in me," from his summons, "Come, follow me." We need to receive life from him, and we need to learn and keep learning from him *how to live* the life we receive. This union of life as a fact and our way of living it only makes sense. I am a husband. That's a fact. Does the way I actually regard and treat my wife have nothing to do with my being her husband? Is the fact enough by itself? I am a father, a friend, a pastor, and more. My life is defined by many relationships, both personal and social. I am a citizen of Bridgeton, Cumberland County, New Jersey, the United States, and the world. Are those mere facts that somehow exist without a need to ask *how* I fulfill, ignore, or betray the responsibilities of my social relationships? Human life is never the mere fact of existence but always a way of living, a way of being in relation to others.

What happened to the gospel in church history is, I think, rather clear. The Roman Empire coopted the Christian faith, and the life and teachings of Jesus did not fit the demands of empire. The man of Galilee was unfit for service to Caesar. So, the humble teacher who put his trust in God rather than in power, wealth, and prestige had to be eliminated from the religion that would continue to bear his name. Jesus Christ was redesigned into the heavenly Caesar of all Caesars whose eternal reign above justified and sanctified the belligerent dominion and self-serving cruelties of the endless Caesars down here on earth.

Where are we now in time and place, and where is Jesus of Nazareth these days? The time of Christian empire has passed, and here in the United States we are rapidly losing our assumption of cultural establishment. This is not a Christian nation that tolerates the presence of other beliefs as long as they do not interfere with Christian dominance in society. And now people no longer come to worship as a matter of course. What once was presumed must now be chosen deliberately from among options. Within this new context of choices, what does it mean for us as a congregation and as individual believers to receive life from Christ *and* to keep drawing from his life and teachings the way we make our choices in life?

Finding our way of life was the goal of the WWJD movement within evangelical Christianity – *What would Jesus do?* I prefer to ask, "What would Jesus have me do?" but the difference is not great because the idea, either way, is to ask how I am to follow Jesus and entrust to him and draw from him the choices of my life. That does not mean Jesus Christ will make my choices for me, as though I could just stop thinking and put decisions on hold until he makes the right choice crystal clear. No, Christ does not take our minds away from us or live our lives for us, as though we were zombies being controlled by divine force. Faith is not an excuse for irresponsibility. I need to trouble my mind with the choices. I need to let the sufferings and needs of other people trouble my mind. And I need to let the life and teachings of Jesus trouble my mind and change the way it works, the way I make decisions.

At the end of his life, determined not to turn back from the end toward which God's love for this world is leading him, Jesus says to his disciples, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." Little children obey because the parent says so. Later, if things go well, they will follow in their own fashion the way of life they have been taught by their parents because they understand, affirm, and have internalized that way of thinking, living, and treating other people. Likewise, we need to move from the childish level of obedience (because God, Jesus, or the Bible says so) to the higher level of friends who understand Jesus and have internalized his views of life and people, accepting the way of his humility and self-giving compassion for the sinful and suffering as the way to live and make choices, trusting God. That's why Jesus went to the cross. It was not to follow a scheme to cut a deal with God or with Satan to achieve our salvation by shedding his blood. He did not turn back from the cross because he would not stop trusting God and drawing his way of life from God's compassion for this world's people. He would give himself rather than try to save himself by giving up on God's way.

"Greater love has no one than this." Jesus laid down his life and with it all his earthly hopes, for the sake of his friends – that's the way we translate it, "friends." And if we give friendship its full, mature meaning, that's right, but we tend to trivialize friendship into our little circle of people it feels good to be with, our grown-up play groups. Jesus has in mind, rather, an expanding circle of people drawn by God's love and mercy into this new way of life. His friends are those who follow his command to love others as he has loved them.

Whether I ask, "What would Jesus do?" or, "What would Jesus have me do?" the answers can be very inconvenient. He puts relationships above personal success and even personal purity. He raises justice and compassion above security. I want to feel safe, and he wants me to care about the people I see as threatening and wish would go away. I like feeling right about something, and he reminds me that being too right can be wrong for his purposes. I want to "tell it like it is," but he lets me see that I don't know how it really is because I'm not in that other person's shoes. I want assurance, and he calls me to trust. I crave rest, and he presents me with someone's need. Then I start enjoying the self-pitying sense of being overworked, and he calls me to relax and have some fun because it really is God's world and I'm indispensable only to those who love me.

Let me end where I began. Jesus' life and teachings matter. He lived what he taught and would not turn back from the way he had to follow to be faithful to God's love for this world. Now we follow him. So, we need to keep learning *how* to follow him, to understand his redemptive purpose, to ask what difference his way makes in the choices at hand, and to trust God for the outcomes. Amen.