



WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“What’s Important”

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Scripture: Mark 8:27-38

September 13, 2009

Charles teaches English at a small college in the Midwest and he has a son who was a downhill skier. The son loved racing down a slope at breakneck speed, pushing himself right up to the edge of being out of control. One afternoon, he went over the edge and took a terrible fall. And as he bounced off the snow his head slammed against a rock. The young man was rushed to the University Hospital where x-rays revealed a severe concussion. For weeks he was in a coma and the prognosis was dire. He was now up against another edge; the edge between life and death. During that time his father had several conversations with his minister, and during one of them he said, “You coast along through life and you think you know what’s important and valuable. You believe your job is really important, and your house and your car, but when death draws near, you finally wake up and see what’s really important.”¹

A few years ago, Hurricane Fran battered the Carolina beaches. This was a favorite vacation spot for our family, so I tuned the TV to a channel that was providing regular updates on the storm.

Reporters were stationed at the key locations that were expected to take the brunt of the hurricane’s fury. They were interviewing weather experts who were tracking the storm and people who had barely survived past hurricanes. Then they turned to a woman who was spending the night in a school set up as an emergency shelter. The woman had recently moved to the beach from Ohio, and was in the process of building her dream home on oceanfront property. The reporter conducting the interview was attempting to present a message of human tragedy. He said to the woman, “This must be devastating for you,” and then he thrust the microphone to her lips. But the woman replied, “No, it’s really not, because the whole family made it out alive and we’re all safe. We can rebuild a house.”

This morning’s passage from the Gospel of Mark is a core conviction for Christians and is found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke as well. The passage grapples with the question: What is genuinely important in life?

Jesus is walking down the road conversing with his disciples and at some point he asks them if they understand what they’ve gotten themselves into and if they have begun to grasp who he is.

They respond by rattling off what others are saying about him. “Some have confused you with that fiery cousin of yours, John the Baptist. Others equate you with the great prophets of the past; the name Elijah comes up constantly.” Jesus nods. They walk a little further, the disciples

wondering how their responses are sitting with him. After a few moments, Jesus breaks the silence, saying, “But I want to know what you think. Who do you say that I am?”

The disciple, Peter, replies with a well-honed Christological formula, “You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being; Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” And Jesus said, “What?”

Actually, Peter does not have his faith completely figured out before he commits to following Jesus, which is a message to all of us. The truth is that we barely begin to figure out our faith until after we commit to following Christ. The pieces don’t start falling into place until after we’ve been on the journey awhile. Instead of spelling out a detailed doctrine of the incarnation, Peter blurts out a succinct reply: “You are the Messiah!”

All eyes quickly turn to Jesus to gauge his response. Is Peter right? Jesus nods his approval. Then, in one of the defining moments of the gospel, Jesus spells out what it means for him to be the Messiah. His words are not soothing, but shocking. He annihilates their notions of a triumphant Messiah who will seize the reigns of power and establish God’s kingdom on earth. He says people will not honor him, they will revile him; people will not embrace him, they will fear him; people will not follow him, they will kill him.

His words are traumatizing and Peter cannot bear them. Peter’s notion of the Messiah is so strikingly different that he is outraged and lashes out at Jesus. The passage says Peter rebukes Jesus, and the Greek word used to describe his rebuke is a verb that describes a rebuke of unclean spirits.

The implication is that Peter tells Jesus that he thinks Jesus is delusional and perhaps even possessed by a demon.²

In a blistering exchange, Jesus castigates Peter, calling him “Satan” and saying, “Get out of my way!” (So much for the meek and mild Jesus who only speaks soft, comforting words). Jesus chastises Peter in front of the others, because he knows that Peter is airing what all of them think. Jesus says, “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Sometimes in life our internal compass goes haywire and we lose our bearings. We get seduced by the mantras of our culture to acquire and accumulate, to focus on our own pleasure and status, to be wary of people who do not agree with us, to get ahead at the expense of others. Jesus challenges us to consider what is genuinely important; what will truly enrich our lives; what will bring us joy and peace and hope. What about you? Do you set your mind on human things or divine things?

If our focus has gone awry Jesus tells us how we can get back on course. Today’s passage says that after his heated exchange with Peter, Jesus not only gathered his disciples, but called in a crowd to join them because he had something vital to share. For anyone who thinks following Jesus is an easy path, his words are sobering. He says, “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 will find it.”

Finding one’s life by losing it is one of the great paradoxes of human existence. It is akin to the realization that it is more rewarding to give than to receive. There is something about the way we are created, that we experience deeper satisfaction and gain the sense that we are in harmony with God when we turn our focus from ourselves to others.

When Jesus challenges us to take up a cross, he is speaking in a radical way about self-sacrifice; he’s talking about giving ourselves to something greater than personal enhancement. There have been giants who took these words to heart and showed us majestic examples of a faithful life.

Francis of Assisi, eschewing a life of wealth and ease for a life of charity and simplicity; Mother Teresa living among the poorest of India to care for the dying; Dietrich Bonhoeffer giving his life in an attempt to stop Adolf Hitler; Martin Luther King, Jr. marching for equality in the face of hate-filled racists.

There have been countless others who were not towering figures, people more like us who took these words to heart and discovered their truth. People who did without so that their children could go to college; people who bought a smaller home so that they could give generously to the church; people who sacrificed their golf game to mentor a child; people who gave up a vacation to go on a mission trip. The call to self-sacrifice has helped many people overcome the self-absorption that leads to a small life and allowed them to experience the deep joy of a full life.

However, these words have also been misused to justify oppression, to deny pleasure, to keep people enslaved and to crush self-worth. None of that is the intention of these words. Jesus sought to lift people's burdens and to liberate them from the things that oppress them. He names his followers the salt of the earth and children of God. When Jesus calls for us to deny ourselves, and when he says that those who lose their life for his sake will find it, he's talking about priorities. He's warning us about the things that get us sidetracked so that we can give proper attention to the things that are genuinely important in life.

A colleague began having regular visits with one of his parishioners who had been told he had less than a year to live, due to lung cancer. During these visits, the man reflected on his life growing up in a small town in Ireland. In his early twenties he fell in love with a beautiful young woman who had riveting green eyes and flowing red hair. One day after work, he and his love had scheduled to meet one another at a park. When he arrived, he saw her in the distance. He began running toward her, and as he was running, he didn't notice a child's doll that was lying in the path. He felt himself kick the doll, but he did not stop. He ran to his love and embraced her, and as he was enjoying this wonderful hug, he felt her stiffen. She was looking over his shoulder. He turned to find a little girl standing in silence with an ashen face of pain and holding the doll with a broken head. The man felt terrible and replaced the doll, but he never forgot that child's face of frozen reproach.

Within a year from that event, his sweetheart died from meningitis. He left Ireland and came to this country where he became a successful business man. He gave up believing in God whom he blamed for taking the love of his life. In time, he married a gracious but physically plain woman. They had four daughters, nine grandchildren, and one great-grandchild was on the way. The man's hope was to live long enough to see his first great-grandchild.

One day the conversation turned very serious and the man said, “I told you about Ireland for a reason. Years ago I had an affair. I was only into money. I traveled a great deal, especially back to New York. The executive secretary of our CEO was elegant, divorced, had a smashing figure, and was quite agreeable to sharing an evening with me. My wife loved me dearly; two of our four daughters had been born. I was making money hand over fist and doing extensive traveling, but my soul was dead. I kept playing the game, laughing bitterly to myself.”

“When I got home from one of the trips when I had been with the other woman, my wife and girls were all over me with warmth and love. I felt something for the first time in years. Disgust.

I felt true disgust at myself. I wanted to burst out the door and run away, but my two girls were clinging to my legs. That night I met God. Not as I had always assumed it would be: God on a golden throne and me shaking my fist saying I’d rather live in hell than with a God like you. I don’t know if it was a dream or a vision, but in the middle of the night there she was, my Irish sweetheart, in all her beauty. She was smiling at me as she used to do, and her right arm was around the little girl, who was holding the doll with the broken head.

I looked again into the terrible silent stare of that little girl, and as I was looking, the child’s face turned slowly into the face of my wife. I felt my heart break. I woke up sobbing, my wife holding me. I told her my last lie. I told her I had a nightmare that we were broke and standing in a bread line. Knowing my history with money, she readily believed me. But in fact, I’ve not cared a hoot about money ever since.”

“I realize my real wealth is the love of my wife and daughters. Our third daughter was conceived that night. She is very special.” The minister asked, “Did you name her after your Irish sweetheart?” He replied, “No, that was our last daughter, the one like an ever bubbling spring. I named our third daughter after the child with the doll. She and I don’t have to talk. We know each other without words. Sometimes I tear up just looking into her face and seeing both the child with the doll and my wife.”³

When the man focused only on his personal desires, he stepped on and crushed what was precious – the doll of the little girl and the heart of his wife. However, once he experienced the power of love – devotion to another that looks to the interest of the other – he discovered what was truly important. Certainly those who lost loved ones on 9/11 understand this. And after Chad’s death, most of us know it.

Christ warns us not to succumb to the temptation to put self-interest ahead of everything else.

He wants us to enjoy the pleasures of this world, but not to be enslaved by them. So he urges us to set our minds on divine things rather than human things, to lose our lives so that we can truly gain them.

Each day we awake, we have an opportunity to redeem and refocus. Each day we have an opportunity to bring more life and love into the world, or to drain life and love out of it. I hope that none of us will wait until the prospect of our own death to finally come to our senses.

NOTES

1. Curtiss Fussell, “The Passion of Jesus,” in *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Winter, 1996, p.33.
2. Paul J. Achtemeier, “Exegesis,” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, September, 1996, p.3.
3. Weaver Stevens, “Easter – Two Stories,” in *Sermons That Work*, (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1991), p.55.