

Surprised by Life

Matthew 16:21-28

By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady
Pastor

August 28, 2011

San Marino Community Church
1750 Virginia Road
San Marino, CA 91108
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185
www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com

All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Have you ever had a moment when you said, if only to yourself, “Now wait just a minute! I didn’t sign up for this!”

Perhaps it was when you first started playing high school sports, and came home from practice with blisters and soreness you had never known before. Possibly it was sometime during your first year of college after studying all night for an exam, or maybe during your first year of marriage, or the first time you were up all night with a sick child. Or maybe it was the first time you had to bathe your aging father when he could no longer bathe himself. “What’s going on here, I didn’t sign up for this!”

Do you remember the story of a flight attendant who had had enough a year ago? Jeremy Slater of JetBlue gave people a piece of his mind after arriving in New York at JFK following a challenging flight. The 38-year-old flight attendant was allegedly hit in the head with a piece of luggage after being treated contemptuously during the flight by a woman passenger. He grabbed the microphone, cursed out the entire aircraft, pulled the emergency slide, grabbed a beer or two, quit his job, and slid down the chute into infamy. It was national news; a graphic illustration of the sentiment also captured in the old country western song, *Take This Job and Shove It* by Johnny Paycheck. Sometimes you find yourself in an uncomfortable place where you think, if only to yourself, “Now wait just a minute! I didn’t sign up for this!”

Peter and the other disciples were hearing for the first time that the way of Christ is the way of self-denial and even suffering for redemptive ends. There can be no Easter without going through the crucifixion of Good Friday. This doesn’t sound like the salvation we all have been waiting for.

We read in Matthew of Peter’s remarkable confession of faith last week. But this week we hear that, though he got the words right, he wasn’t at all prepared for the lifestyle that goes with it. This will have to be a lived faith. There is a necessary progression. First one must begin thinking the faith, followed by a confession of faith, which then leads finally to the profession of faith. Confession of faith and profession of faith are inextricably linked in these two texts. And a profession of faith inevitably involves the way of self-denial and even suffering for Christ’s sake.

For the first time in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that he must die. No real explanation is given, only that it is necessary. Peter responds with incredulity. The one who is the "rock," upon whom Jesus will build the Church, has suddenly become a "stumbling block." One can faintly hear the story of Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil to take an easier road in this text. Jesus confronts Peter's response telling him to fall in line behind and follow him. Peter must stop looking at things from a human point of view. We seem to be programmed for survival – either fight or flight in times of danger. Peter becomes aggressive in response here but later will take to "flight" after the arrest in the garden. God's way requires resisting the impulse to flee when circumstances become demanding.

There are surprises in life. So maybe we shouldn't be so surprised that the life of faith is often very different than we expect it to be. In the Church we may need to stop looking at things from only a human perspective. Some of us have been around the Church all our lives and know the stories and the language of faith, and yet we may have wondered if there isn't more to it than this; if there isn't a deeper experience of the spiritual life. Some of us have been content to stay on the edges of religious faith, attending church occasionally, maybe even remembering a time in our lives when all of this was quite important but somehow seems to have faded in the press of other important concerns in life. Worship just seems like such a strange thing to do; singing hymns from a different century and confessing and praying and listening to ancient words from the Bible.

Plenty of students are walking into classrooms these days where they have to learn a whole new language to understand what is going on. Quantum physics has a language all its own. You wouldn't expect a college freshman to be able to understand everything about it in the first 15 minutes of class without studying the prerequisite language and the fundamental ideas behind quantum physics. Some students may even have to catch up to the rest of the class if their preparation was somehow inadequate, just to stay on top of the material. But when it comes to church, we seem to expect that all that has been written over 21 centuries of Christian thought ought to be immediately intelligible to anyone within the first 15 minutes of walking into worship, without any effort on their part.

An article in an issue of *The Christian Century* entitled “Our Life Story” by M. Craig Barnes, tells the story of a conversation with a young seminary student who asks, “What’s the deal with all of these required courses? When do we get to study things that are relevant?” It is the same question of relevance that church members often ask when they wonder aloud about using ancient creeds for the affirmation of faith or older hymns and structures for worship. Barnes analyzes the assumption behind the question concluding that, at least for many in our culture, the self is the final arbiter of what is relevant. “The individual is the one, and the only one, who gets to decide if something is relevant” in contemporary society. ¹

As people try to cobble together a life as best they can, with relationships, work, philosophy of life, religion all “a la carte resources that can, or cannot be used in building a life that we prefer,” ² Christian faith can seem irrelevant. With the self in command of determining what is to be valued based upon our own limited experiences, our lives run the risk of becoming so focused upon “relevance” that we can lose revelation and God altogether.

Worship and the life of faith communities turn the tables and introduce us to a larger story than our own, which defines human life differently and then asks whether we, as individuals, are relevant to the unfolding story of creation; a story that belongs to God. It may be the one and only time each week that we step outside of ourselves and where the story of our lives is evaluated. In other words, we become the evaluated rather than the evaluators. That may help explain why church sometimes feels so foreign and irrelevant.

Faith has a different worldview, formed and handed down from generation to generation. There is a holy story to tell. Week after week the liturgy tells that story, through which we come to a different self-understanding as we discover the Lord of life and the life of faith. Craig Barnes concludes the article, “From the perspective of a casual observer, not much is going on in either the seminary curriculum or the church liturgy that is relevant to the felt needs of the individual. But if you peer beneath the individual’s clamoring and conflicting desires, you may find a soul that has begun to breathe again.” ³

¹ Barnes, M. Craig *The Christian Century* article entitled “Our Life Story”, February 9, 2010.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Peter is learning to breathe again through faith. He is expecting a Messiah that will bring salvation in human terms, for his own kind. But Christ is after much more than that - the salvation of life itself. Peter's horizon (and ours) must be lifted beyond the present. The reign of God is being birthed in our lives and world. Like every birth, there is pain and suffering but it will not last forever. We can bear our share of the difficulty because we know it leads to something wonderful. When we live with purpose, we can embrace our share of the suffering in the world, even freely exposing ourselves to it because we know there are more important things in life than simply avoiding suffering. "Those who try to save their life will lose it."⁴ It is those who lose their life for the sake of Christ who find it.

The British Government passed the Merchant Shipping Act in 1876. The law required each ship to bear a mark on its bow to indicate when the vessel had received the maximum amount of cargo permitted for safe voyage. If that mark fell below waterline, the ship was required to unload enough cargo to bring the mark back up to water level. This marking was called the "Plimsoll Mark," named after the British reformer who was instrumental in the passage of the law. Each of us has a Plimsoll Mark of sorts. It signals the limit beyond which we cannot receive any additional load. God knows our limits and will not allow us to carry more than we can bear. We sometimes question God's ability to read the Plimsoll Mark but the Lord is faithful and will keep us afloat, even when we feel like our ship is going down.

The arrest in the garden, the trial before the authorities, the crowds yelling for his crucifixion, the mocking, the hitting, the nailing, the cross, the humiliation, the betrayal, the abandonment, the grief, it was finally over – except for the tears. Jesus was gone forever and with him the dream of a better world. It was time to come back to reality. There was no Kingdom of God, only the world as it is where power politics and those with the right influence determine the outcomes. The last thing they ever expected was that somehow Jesus Christ was going to walk back into their lives. And it happened at the very place they least expected it - from the tomb! One goes to the cemetery to honor the dead, not to find life. He came back into their lives and with him the dream of a better world that Easter.

⁴ Ibid.

Faith is about more than the discovery that Christ lives. It is also the discovery that Christ triumphs. It is not only the fear of death but the fear of defeat that is defeated; not only endless living but victorious living that's discovered. A disaster became a coronation. There was no grave deep enough, no seal imposing enough, no guard powerful enough, no stone heavy enough, to keep Christ in the grave. The world learned in that tomb that hate, violence, and greed are not the most potent forces in the world. On the cross the world said, "No" but God said, "Yes!" at the tomb. From that tomb has emerged centuries of Christian witness, people from every culture and land who have experienced something of that most potent of forces; the resurrected Christ.

Hatred, racism, ethnic cleansing, disease, war - they don't control the outcome anymore than Pilate or Herod controlled the outcome. Not even the grave can contain or restrain God's redemption! It may not look like it now. The world is disoriented and a disorienting place. It can look like the end of Christendom, the secularization of society, the collapse of morality, the end of faith but Easter proclaims the message, "It ain't over yet!" And you just never know where the resurrected Christ is going to turn up next! It may be in church or it may be in the middle of the night or possibly on a mission trip or in the home of a poor family or to protect a child living with abuse or in a courtroom or a hospital room or in a lab, or in Africa and Latin America and China where the Church is growing exponentially. You just never know!

The will of God may be postponed but not conquered; deferred but not defeated. Altars have a way of outlasting armaments. Spires endure when finally we lay down our spears. And therefore, the efforts you make to live morally, to love others, the loyalties you keep, the suffering you endure for Christ's sake, the holy dreams you envision are not in vain. From Easter radiates the life of Christ through human history, through our lives, and through our communal life together in this church. There is no Easter without Good Friday We will have to learn as Peter did, to think differently and to see things not from a human perspective but from God's. Amen