

“Life & Loss; Give & Take”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 146:1-5
New Testament Lesson: Matthew 16:21-28

Steve Arterburn, cofounder of New Life Clinics, a Christian provider of psychiatric and psychological services, was asked, “What prevents us from sharing our problems more openly at church?” He answered:

“Just look at what invitation to conversion we use: ‘Come to Jesus, and your life is going to be wonderful. It’s going to be great, fantastic. All these problems are going to go away.’ There’s some truth to that, but when you hear Dietrich Bonhoeffer say, ‘When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die,’ that’s the reality that I’ve seen in the Christian faith,” says Arterburn. “I have problems now I would never have had if I hadn’t accepted Christ. There’s guilt that I’ve experienced that I would never even have thought twice about. We have to be realistic with people and tell them that when you come to Jesus, there is a new purpose and a fulfillment, but the struggle is going to continue.

We have so many lukewarm Christians or people who turn away from the faith because they’ve been promised this ease.”¹ In other words, Jesus promises a lot, including a sense of ease and abiding peace. But that ease and peace comes not in the form of worldly comforts – though Christ followers certainly can and do enjoy worldly comforts – but that ease and peace we have deep down in our souls comes from a greater promise than worldly comforts.

It comes from giving of ourselves in the name of Jesus for the sake of others, confident that Christ meets all our true needs and will be with us through all our ups and downs. This balance between worldly comforts and selfless service – and all the promises of being a follower of Christ – are exactly what we see playing out in today’s New Testament lesson. When Peter hears Jesus say he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised, Peter doesn’t understand! Why would someone as good and giving as Jesus suffer like that? Why does any good person have to suffer?

It’s a question we ask all the time, isn’t it? Cancer strikes, and we scream, “Why, Lord God?!” The bills pile up, and then the car dies. You put yourself out there to help, and then more needs arise, more requests come to you. Life is not easy, and being a follower of Jesus is even harder.

¹ Michael G. Maudlin, “I’m Not OK, You’re Not OK,” Christianity Today, February 9, 1998, 32.

And yet, the exchange between Peter and Jesus we heard read today is the key to getting through life with an inner sense ease and a deep, comforting sense of peace.

Peter hears about Jesus' destiny – his plans, really God's plans for our salvation through Jesus – and Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." And Jesus turns and says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me, for you are setting your mind – not on divine things – but on human things," on worldly things.

Jesus has a bigger picture, *the* bigger picture, which sadly does include tragedy and suffering in life *and* also *the* way of truly overcoming it.

Jesus 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."

He's talking about selfless service. Giving of yourself because there is a need, because you are a living, breathing, Spirit-filled person capable of helping, capable of giving.

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.
The Prayer of St. Francis.

What if you were to memorize that prayer – Google it or go the library and make a copy, and memorize it? What if you were to live that prayer? What if everyone were to live that prayer? What if at the very least all Christians lived that prayer? Can you imagine the change it would make in this world, in your life, in our life together?!? That is what Jesus is asking of us when he says, "For what will it profit them (those half-hearted Christians or deniers of Christ) if they gain the whole world, but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" Life and loss; give and take. What will you give in return for your life; what will I give? Jesus shows us the way to true life, true peace, true blessing, and that way is not the way of the world.

In his book, "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff – and It's All Small Stuff," Richard Carlson, Ph.D. – no relation – challenges us to look at our problems in a new light. "Rather than push away the problem and resist it, try to embrace it," he says. "Mentally, hold the problem near to your heart. Ask yourself what valuable lesson(s) this problem might be able to teach you

Could it be teaching you to be more careful or patient? Does it have anything to do with greed, envy, carelessness or forgiveness? Or something equally powerful?

Whatever problems you are dealing with," says Carlson, "chances are they could be thought of in a softer way that includes a genuine desire to learn from them."² What will you give in return for you life? Will you give yourself? Will you give in service to Christ, knowing that "it is in giving that we receive"?

Our calling as followers of Jesus is to give ourselves over to the way of Jesus Christ, day by day, in whatever way we can. Think about it, right now. In what way could you be a better, more selfless, more giving follower of Christ? What is hitting you in the heart right now? In what area of life do you know in your heart you are holding back on Jesus, holding back on God? This is your opportunity to pledge and commit yourself right now – in the company of this congregation and the presence of the Lord – to be a better follower of Jesus.

Everyone, I'm going to ask you to turn to the person sitting next to you and share one way that you could be a better follower of Jesus. Or if you can't do that, at least name it in your heart, and share it with someone later on, so that you actually breathe life into that prayer, that commitment.

I'm going to ask you to do that in just a moment – share one way that you could stretch yourself as a follower of Christ. You will need to be brave. You will need to be vulnerable. You will need to be prayerful and thoughtful. (pause) Anything coming to mind?

Remember, this is a place of safety and love, a place of insight and truth, a place of courage and divine strength. And for this exercise, let's pledge confidentiality. You can do this. What is one way you could be a better follower of Christ. Take a moment now to think of it. (pause)

OK, in just a moment, I'm going to invite you to turn to the person next to you and in one or two brief sentences share it, share it before God as a living, breathing prayer and pledge, and then let's be praying for the other person in the days (and weeks ahead) if someone share something with you. Do that now. Amen.

² Dr. Richard Carlson, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff ... and It's All Small Stuff* (New York: Hyperion, 1997),184.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, it's only natural for us to resist the truth that suffering is part of life. We go to great lengths to avoid it for ourselves and to spare those we love from any pain, struggle or discomfort.

Merciful Savior, grant us the wisdom to see the hidden blessing you have for us, even amid our suffering. Grant us the presence of mind to embrace suffering as a chance to learn more about faith and hope and trust in you.

Lead us through those times of growth and maturity that come from struggle and difficulty. We ask for courage to face such times as a reflection of the life of Christ, who greeted his own suffering with dignity, humility and grace.

And still, Lord, we know that you grieve those times of suffering that overwhelm us and consume us. So we pray your healing touch and Spirit of peace upon all who suffer this day, and particularly upon those we hold dear in our hearts.

We pray all this in Jesus' name, praying together as he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**