The Way of the Cross: Obedience and Commitment

Matthew 16:13-28 Kimby Young

Isaiah 55:1-3, 8-13 April 2, 2017

If the scripture today from Matthew seemed familiar, it is. I used the parallel passage from Luke at the beginning of this sermon series about the Way of the Cross. There are a few differences. But the opening questions “Who do you say that I am” and the central phrase are the same - “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

I think this passage reminds us, even with the best of intentions, sometimes we get it right and sometimes we get it wrong. Look at Peter – one day praised as having all the right answers. “Blessed are you … on this rock I will build my church.” And the next, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” Try as we may, we will not reach the perfection of Jesus. But then again, perfection is not expected of us. So just what is expected of us?

When anyone joins a Presbyterian Church anywhere, some variation of questions are asked. The oldest version is - Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior? Do you trust in God? Do you intend to be Christ’s disciple, to obey God’s Word and to show God’s love? There are many important words in these questions but I want to look at just two today – trust and obey. And yes, I know that some of you now have the old hymn rolling thru your mind. Trust and obey.

Obedience is sometimes hard for us. It feels like giving up control. It feels like passive submission. And in our culture, sometimes that is true of obedience. But in our faith – obedience is very active, very deliberate, and very purposeful. It is a choice to trust that God is in control, to trust that God knows more than we do, and to decide to actively seek God’s will, even when that choice might be more difficult. “Take up your cross, and follow Jesus.”

The challenge in life is to discover what that obedience looks like for each of us. For me obedience meant going to seminary, becoming ordained, serving in the church, moving to Gardner and who knows what next. For you, it will mean something entirely different. And obedience might lead you to different actions at different times in your life. The challenge is to make the commitment to follow Jesus, and then again and again to discern what that commitment means for your life, for your day, for your relationships. Part of our Lenten journey this season, has been to think about the more difficult parts of that commitment – taking up your cross, losing your life, as the scripture says. I don’t think God wants any of us to die for our faith. Rather I believe this “losing your life” is more about giving up control of your life – putting your life in God’s hands, making your decisions based on what Jesus would do. Obedience to God is about not letting your needs and desires, or even your hopes and dreams, control your life. Obedience to God is allowing all of our actions to be according to God’s will. All of our actions, all of our thoughts, all of our hopes and dreams.

There’s an Old Testament story about Elijah – one of THE greatest prophets of all time. In this story Elijah is standing up against King Ahab and Jezebel – who are trying to persuade the people of Israel to worship another god – Baal. In this story, Elijah takes matters into his own hands and stages a great showdown between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and the false god Baal. He challenges all the priests of Baal to prove which God is better. It’s a wonderful dramatic story and contest. They will each ask their respective gods to light an alter with fire. Of course, the story is very well told and goes on and on – with taunting and crowd appeal and great pomp and mystery. In the end, the priests of Baal look like fools while Elijah’s God does exactly what Elijah asks and reigns down fire from heaven to light the altar, consume the offering and prove once and for all how great our God is. It’s a fantastic story about the power of God and the power of faith. But there’s a second message that develops in the chapters that follow. Elijah had assumed that because he has proven how great God is, then everyone will turn to God. Elijah’s plan doesn’t work. Ahab and Jezebel still want to kill him. So Elijah runs away and hides in a cave – and kind of pouts about it. God of course, comes to Elijah – his beloved servant. And this is the famous “still small voice” chapter from 1 Kings. God doesn’t come in wind or storm or earthquake or fire – God comes in a still small voice – a quiet presence of God and whispering in your heart. God will always come to us if we are open and seeking and waiting. God will always come to us. And God tells Elijah GOD’S plan – not the plan Elijah cooked up with smoke and mirrors – but God’s plan. As Elijah chooses obedience, as Elijah chooses to follow God’s plan – of course God’s plan unfolds and succeeds in the chapters that follow.

I love this story – for many reasons. But one of the best messages for me is that God is in control. That God has a much better plan than I could comprehend, and that I would save myself a lot of trouble and worry and struggle – if I would just listen for God’s plan first. But it’s hard. I like control. I like to have things my way. I like to think I know what I’m doing. And I seem to like to worry, judging by the fact that I do it so often. But as scripture says, “My way is not God’s way. My thoughts are not God’s thoughts.” God has a plan – a good and perfect plan. And if I trust God and give my life into God’s hands, I will be much better off. As today’s scripture from Matthew says, “Whoever loses their life for me will find it.” Obedience is about giving my life to God and trusting that God will take it and make it right, that God will take my life and use it for good, that I will find my true self and my true calling in God’s plan. If we truly trust God, this shouldn’t be so hard. Take up your cross and follow Jesus.

So here’s my confession of the sermon. I have plans for this church. Your session has dreams for this church. We believe we are called to grow, to reach out into this community and witness to God’s love made real in Jesus Christ our Lord. When I start to think about the how and how much of our planning – I start to worry – that I’m not good enough, that we can’t pull it off, that we won’t be willing to change as perhaps we will need to change, that others may not be attracted to this church or won’t stay. Or on and on with any number of doubts. I worry. But today’s scripture reminds me to give it all into God’s hand – to lose my dreams and schemes – and to trust God. That is how God’s plan comes to be. That is how I witness to God’s grace. That is how God makes whatever happens good. Of course I still have to do my part – give my time and talent and trust. I still have to do my best and try to do what I think is God’s will. And you have to do your part. Give your time and talent and energy. Share God’s good news. That’s the commitment part. But I trust that God has this. God knows what we need to do. I need only commit to God, and listen to God and obey.

The way of the cross is obedience and commitment. And again, Jesus is our model. Jesus was obedient to God’s plan, even though it led to the cross. Our commitment is to listen for God’s voice, to look for God’s plan, to seek God’s will, and to follow Jesus Christ wherever that leads, where ever God leads.

My prayer for you this season, for all of us this Lent and beyond…

My prayer is that your way is clear, that you will understand where God is calling you, that you will trust God and obey this call, that you will follow Jesus Christ, and thus that you will be blessed. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.