



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A Call to Life

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

August 31, 2008

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Matthew 16:13-28

Here's the way one commentary on the lectionary readings for this Sunday begins its reflection: "The readings for this Sunday invite the listening church into the fullness of covenantal existence."

Here's the problem with that: This year, these readings will most likely not be spoken to a listening church; no, on Labor Day weekend, most of our churches would best be described as a *vacationing* church. The irony of the situation isn't lost on us, is it? Jesus' urgent call to lose one's life is being cast into the cultural milieu of a people seeking to lose themselves by enjoying a few days off, by escaping the demands of modern life, or by relaxing near the water with a cold drink and a free-from-care mind. "Take up my cross?," our culture asks. "No thanks. I'll take up this space, but that's about it for today."

Ironically, on a day when most citizens of our country will be escaping from work, those of us who have gathered for worship have been listening to texts that call us to a new vocation. Our reading from Exodus tells the story of the call of Moses and his commission to lead the people of Israel out of captivity in Egypt.

Psalm 105 sings of God's great acts of faithfulness and mercy in Israel's life, especially of the vocations of Moses and Aaron.

Paul, in his letter to the church in Rome, vividly describes what the new "job" of Christians is, including the call to be completely transformed for a new life in the world.

As if these texts weren't challenging enough, Matthew ratchets up the rhetoric by recording some of Jesus' most difficult words about discipleship. Following on the heels of Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus tells the disciples that he will be rejected, suffer, and be killed. "Oh, and by the way," says Jesus to his *listening* disciples, "you're invited to join me in this suffering obedience." It wasn't an easy sell then, and we dare not expect things to be different today. These are challenging words.

Our passage from Matthew serves as the turning point in his gospel. Since reading the first verse of Matthew's gospel, readers have been waiting for someone to proclaim the truth that Matthew has alluded to throughout the first 15½ chapters. As Tom Long describes it, "This passage...is a culmination of prior elements in the Gospel. Streams that have sprung forth earlier in Matthew now flow together into a deep and refreshing pool, from which the rest of the Gospel will draw."

We've been waiting for someone to discover and proclaim who Jesus is, and the Apostle Peter finally announces: "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." With this confession ringing in his ears, Jesus now sets his face firmly toward Jerusalem and the cross. This is the turning point of Matthew's whole gospel.

But before he sets out, Jesus issues a surprising order. The disciples have finally

announced with Peter's confession that they know who he is, and Jesus has confirmed what they've said. But, just when they've figured out the truth, Jesus orders the disciples not to share it. And that begs the question: Why?

"Why would Jesus not want his disciples to spread the good news? The reason is that there are two ways to distort and misunderstand Jesus: One is to get the word about him all wrong; the other is to get it half right. At this point, the disciples have it right, but only half right. They know that Jesus is truly the Messiah, but they do not yet understand the companion truth: Jesus, the Messiah, must suffer and die. If they were to become evangelists at this moment, they would proclaim a half-truth—a cost-free gospel, Jesus without the cross."

In a Gospel where even the birth stories are tinged by the shadows of the cross, Jesus now begins to reveal the other half of the truth the disciples were asked to proclaim: The Messiah was going to be rejected, suffer, and be killed. Jesus will have to repeat this information at least three more times in Matthew's pages, each time seeking to explain what it really means to be the Christ.

But how could these disciples, steeped in the expectations of a Messiah who would reign in glory; who would conquer all of Israel's enemies; who would set things right—how could they possibly grasp a Messiah marked by such vulnerability and pain? It made absolutely no sense.

The concept of a suffering, dying Messiah is ridiculous. Everything Jesus was telling the disciples seemed backwards. Never in their wildest dreams would the disciples have imagined the Messiah to be strong through the weakness of suffering. In a world where power consumes, the idea of a consumed Messiah seemed heretical to the disciples then, and perhaps more so to us today.

"Surely Jesus had it wrong," we think. Only Simon Peter did more than just think it; he spoke it aloud: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." As Long points out, the one who had just been crowned the Rock upon which the church would be built has crumbled into a stumbling block.

This harsh exchange between Peter and Jesus is painful to overhear. Peter, in an attempt to set Jesus straight, utters what he thinks are supportive words. Only, when Jesus hears them, they don't sound supportive at all; they sound eerily familiar. Though the voice is different, the temptation is the same. Whether he intended it or not, Peter was tempting Jesus to believe that he could become the glorified Messiah without the pain and suffering of the cross. Standing between Jesus and Jerusalem was a stumbling block. If Jesus bought into Peter's words, it would mean diverting from the road to the cross, which, in Jesus' mind was as far from the will of God as he could go. And so, in a painfully forceful way, Jesus exclaims: "Get behind me, Satan!" It was as if he were saying, "If Peter can't accept in trust the stumbling block of the cross, then he himself will become a stumbling block strewn in the pathway of God's Son."

As alarming as it was to hear that the cross was God's will for Jesus, the disciples could never have been prepared for Jesus' next words: "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." Jesus

was now reminding the disciples that the cross is God's will for them too.

Convincing ourselves and others that we need to give our life away to gain it is a hard sell. Too often, we view life through the what's-in-it-for-me lens. We have even looked at these difficult words from Jesus this way. Viewed this way, we talk about our cross to bear as a burden placed upon us, perhaps even by God, instead of as a posture of discipleship. In Matthew's context, this posture we undertake means living life bent toward God in all aspects of our being.

Tom Long describes it this way: Bearing a cross means "following the way of Jesus, and that involves standing with those who are weak, opening the doors to those who are unacceptable, loving those who are unlovely....Cross bearers are dropouts in the school of self-promotion. They do not pick up their crosses as a means for personal fulfillment, career advancement, or self-expression; rather, they 'deny themselves' and pick up their crosses, like their Lord, because of the needs of other people."

So what is asked of the Messiah is asked of the Messiah's people. Some have suggested that Jesus' language sounds "almost too radical to be realistic, too sharp and demanding to be taken seriously." Our corrupted imaginations assume that there is a way to gain life other than by losing it, a way to Easter other than through Good Friday, an avenue to messiahship other than through suffering and death. Jesus' questions curtail any such thought: "For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

And that's the upside-down nature of the gospel. Bearing a cross may seem an act of defeat, but in God's eyes it shouts triumph. It's the mystery of the gospel that what appears to crush everything one hopes to be as a human being—bearing the cross of service and suffering—is in fact the only way for a human to be fully alive.