

Profit and Loss Statement

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. William D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
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Text: Matthew 16:21-28

The Message

Then Jesus made it clear to his disciples that it was now necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, submit to an ordeal of suffering at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, then on the third day be raised up alive. Peter took him in hand, protesting, "Impossible, Master! That can never be!"

But Jesus didn't swerve. "Peter, get out of my way. Satan, get lost. You have no idea how God works."

Then Jesus went to work on his disciples. "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want, but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

"Don't be in such a hurry to go into business for yourself. Before you know it, the Son of Man will arrive with all the splendor of his Father, accompanied by an army of angels. You'll get everything you have coming to you, a personal gift. This isn't pie in the sky by and by. Some of you standing here are going to see it take place, see the Son of Man in kingdom glory."

The Sermon

I had a dream recently. When I awakened I simultaneously laughed and felt a troubling sense of shame. My laughter came from the fact that this was a dream about ethical and moral dilemmas I was facing 20+ years ago; and my troubled conscience was the result of recognizing that I clearly had some unresolved issues regarding these ethical/moral areas of life, or I wouldn't have to be dreaming about them.

The dream centered on a time when I was working at a state university in the Midwest. My position called for extensive travel throughout the state. The combination of the level of the position I held in the university's hierarch, and its travel requirements, meant that I could go to the university motor pool and pick out a vehicle that would then be assigned to my use 24/7. It also meant that gas, car washes, all maintenance, etc..were on the university's tab.

Pretty cool, huh?

Cool that is, except that my much-later dream implied that this vehicle wasn't just about my job, it also involved my "pecking order" in the scheme of things.

I dreamed that once I had selected the car and had driven it back to the College of Extended Learning, where I worked, all my colleagues wanted to come out and take a look at it. And one said, "Why did you choose this car. You could just as easily have selected one that has 200 more horsepower " Another said, "Why did you

choose this car. You could have picked one that has many more luxury features.” And so on, and so forth. So, in my retrospective dream at least, instead of going about my work with a clear conscience, I was obsessing as to whether or not I had been foolish in my university vehicle of choice.

So, was it about the vehicle? No. It was about me, and isn't that what temptation is typically all about – me, my family, my racial/ethnic group, my country, how my beliefs are, (or are not) honored by others, irrespective of their beliefs and values?

So it was, even with Jesus. Satan only had power – in whatever form he appeared to Jesus in his time of wilderness testing or here in the form of disciple Peter – if in his humanity Jesus truly had the option to opt for what the world had to offer him, or what he believed to be God's call on his life.

And so it is for me, or for you.

Another case in point from my time in ministry.

A few years back Kathy and I participated in a workshop at Zephyr Point Conference Center in South Lake Tahoe in fulfillment of the requirements for me to be certified as an interim minister.

Following our return to the Northwest, a pastoral colleague from the small group I was in as part of the training, sent me an email. He informed that he'd checked out the web site for Pullman Presbyterian Church – where I was serving as Interim at the time – and wrote “I was surprised by the size of your congregation. I thought you'd be serving a bigger church.”

Now I'd been thrilled to have the privilege of being at the Pullman church, but it was tempting to wonder if I'd short-changed my “calling” by being there. Thus my friend was function as the “Tempter” in this case, and I needed to say in my own mind and heart, “Get thee behind me Satan!”

I clearly knew my friend David wasn't Satan. In truth I really liked him, to the point that at the training event he and I found we were soul mates who hung out together on breaks.

It also helped cement our relationship when his wife and Kathy also hit it off. All of which made his e-mail even more toxic – and more tempting.

Which brings me back to the text. We read:

“Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes (or as Dale Bruner translates it: “suffer deeply at the hands of the lay leaders, senior pastors, and Bible teachers”), and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

Peter, totally missing Jesus' final statement about being raised (and who wouldn't?) took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

How would you like that on your apostolic record? "Rebuked Jesus."

"God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you" is how Peter's rebuke appears in Scripture.

Now we know that Peter loved Jesus and that Jesus dearly loved Peter as well. In the narrative just prior to this one, Jesus called Peter "blessed" and the "rock on which he would build his church."

Now, in the very next scene, Jesus does not call Peter blessed. He does not call Peter a rock on which he will build his church. Instead, he calls Peter, "Satan."

But that's not all. Jesus goes on to say to Peter, You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.

Well, "Duh," Peter might have wanted to reply. "I am human after all, so is it fair to so quickly go from being your solid rock to becoming a stumbling block?"

But, this story isn't about Peter, is it, except possibly as a foil for the human/ Divine One, Jesus the Anointed One.

And here, as in the Temptation stories in wilderness, we see the humanity of Jesus.

Had Jesus not been tempted by Satan in the wilderness – truly tempted to where he actually had the option to select, indeed likely wanted to select, Satan's options – it wouldn't have been temptation at all. It would have just been for show.

It apparently wasn't just for show in the Wilderness then, nor in his encounter with Peter in this text.

Jesus might well have said to his friend, "Good God, Peter, don't you know how much I'd love for this not to happen?"

But, he didn't have time for such niceties, not on the road to Jerusalem.

The humble servant Jesus of Nazareth, who was willing to go to Jerusalem to die because Scripture reports that he believed this to be God's will for his life, has been so easily ignored in much of the history of Jesus the Christ's Church.

Why? I think it's because we who are so very much human now and always, prefer the triumphant Risen Lord and Savior. We can thank the Apostle Paul for setting the tone for such thinking, but we probably would have found a way to develop the story in this manner with or without apostolic affirmation.

That Jesus told his disciples that “if you want to follow me, you too must take up your cross,” is so easily forgotten by those of us who profess to truly want to follow our Lord.

We much prefer to say, “Jesus died, so we don’t have to. Now let’s go live good lives, live involving peace, joy, success!”

As you likely know, the Gospel of Success is big business in the U.S. these days.

Books such as “Grow Your Wealth the Biblical Way” can be readily found.

A book and program proclaiming Jesus as the greatest CEO who ever lived was hot – at least for a while. Can you imagine what Jesus of Nazareth would think about that?

Jesus of Nazareth did, however, think in profit and loss terms. He proclaims:

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 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?

Tough questions for his little band of followers 2,000 years ago. Tough questions for his little bands of followers – who truly want to follow Him – in 2011.

How we respond makes a huge difference.

Thanks be to God.