

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

Not My Music

A sermon preached July 6, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 ¹⁶ "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷ 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; ¹⁹ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "I thank¹ you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Romans 7:15-25 [The Message]

15-16 What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary.

17-20 But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

21-23 It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

24 I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?

25 The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

I want to talk today about commitment to the gospel, trying to suggest what it looks like and what it doesn't, what we are called to be as opposed to what we choose

to be, and what it might feel like to live the gospel as opposed to living in ways that make us feel good. I want to try to be honest about the way of the cross, even though I do so knowing that I, and no doubt each of us, will tend to choose a life that falls below that high calling. And, in that event, we will, at least, try to be honest about the gap. Finally, I want to talk about the barriers to faithfulness that lie within us and outside of us in the world where we are called to serve.

Here is what Jesus says in Matthew 16:24-25: "Then Jesus told his disciples, '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.'"

And here is what Jesus says in Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Well, which is it going to be for us? While these passages don't exactly contradict each other, they certainly do veer off in radically different directions. One is vigorous and challenging, the other comforting and soothing. The former demands costly risk, the latter is risk averse and safe.

Which, for you, expresses the essential nature of the Christian faith? Both are teachings attributed to Jesus, but in their own way present a Jesus of contrasting mood and divergent message. What is it we are signing up for when he says, "Follow me" – a vigorous life of spiritual courage and daring prophetic duty, or a soothed and nurtured life lived under Jesus' protective wing?

It is like the dilemma facing Pig and Chicken who had become friends roaming the same barnyard. Life on the farm was good. Feed was ample, their living quarters clean and sheltered against the storm, and Farmer MacDonald was kind and humane. Thus, one day Chicken was inspired to suggest that he and Pig form a committee of two to do something nice in return for Old MacDonald to show their appreciation. Chicken's bright idea was that someday soon they prepare a nice breakfast of ham and eggs for the farmer's breakfast. A stricken look flashed across Pig's face as he said, "Chicken, for you that's token involvement; for me it's total commitment!"

It is easy to edit out the more rigorous demands of Christ and make the gospel more therapeutic than threatening, more a matter of spiritual security and soul satisfaction than service and ministry. Stanley Hauerwas, theologian at Duke Divinity School, agrees: "It's hard to remember," he says, "that Jesus did not come to make us safe, but rather to make us disciples, citizens of God's new age, a kingdom of surprise."

It's easy, too, to allow the spirit of the times, the interests of the greater culture, and the prevailing political mood to force the issue. If you feel caught in the middle, stand over there with Jesus. His frustration overflows with the Pharisees' carping and criticizing. There's just no way you can win with some people. John the Baptist arrives looking and acting like a Jeremiah throw-back, his preaching vigorous and demanding, his life-style more severe than the most severe reading of the Law, but the Pharisees condemn him as nuts. Jesus arrives on the scene and he is condemned as a libertine. "Damned if you do, damned if you don't" might properly describe the vise grip leaders want to exercise over those who would deviate from the

norms of the times. The main issue is control, of course – who gets to be in charge of the gospel? Who gets to pipe the tune?

Well, Jesus sang and danced his own melodies and harmonies, and they weren't satisfying to most of the world around him, and so must we if we are to follow him. Get with the times, some say. If we like rap, you must like rap or you're not really one of us. If hip-hop is the day's beat, get with it! My, what a lot of trouble that has gotten us into when we allow the gospel to become the tool of the times.

What's it going to be for us: sacrifice or self-satisfaction? Or, as Hauerwas puts it, safety or discipleship? The cross, let us never forget, is an instrument of torture and execution. The mind and heart of a Christian has to go through a lot of editing and forgetting in order to not shudder at the sight of a cross. But, of course, that's the blunting effect of hundreds of years of cultural influence and accommodation to the times. The rigor of a religion inevitably seems to weaken and blends into and becomes identified with the larger culture. The stringent images and severe demands of the faith disappear into rules of accepted morality. Following Christ – what was once referred to as *The Way* – has become virtually synonymous with *the American Way* in the minds of many. The vigorous rejection of Christianity by some has virtually nothing to do with the essentials of the faith and everything to do with the way the faith has been overwhelmed by a culture that strikes many as massively materialistic and morally unbridled. The distinctiveness of the faith and life of Christ has gone into the blender of civil culture and come out frothy, sweet, and on ice.

Take Matthew 10:38, for instance: “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” Why does the cross hanging above our heads not threaten us. Why does it not unease us? Think how differently the sign of the cross and that particular scriptural passage might have struck a tiny group of persecuted Christians gathered for worship in Rome during the emperor Domitian's reign. They knew well what a cross was and what it was for. They well knew the ruthless efficiency of Roman rule. That word *cross* spoken out loud, a symbol of torture and death and the severe claims of Jesus upon his followers, likely could have sucked all the oxygen out of the room for those people. As for us...well, a colleague tells of wanting to buy a cross-and-chain necklace for her niece who was being confirmed. She told the jewelry store salesperson generally what she wanted, and the clerk said, “Do you want a plain one or one with the little man on it?”

This result of this long process of desensitization to the self-denial and discipline our faith demands has led to tragic consequences for us and the world. This being the weekend of Independence Day celebrations, it is fitting to think soberly about what it would mean to live as “citizens of God's new age,” as Stanley Hauerwas puts it, instead of living as though there is no disconnect between the demands of our faith and, for instance, the cynical use of American military and political power. The Iraq war was justified in part by some fundamentalist religious leaders and not a few of our politicians in religious terms, not only wrapping themselves in the flag but also verbally holding aloft the cross, though virtually every mainstream denomination in the US (including ours) and most ecumenical bodies nationally and worldwide vigorously opposed the war. I am willing to bet that most of you remember the religious and spiritual support for the war on the part of some conservative preachers and

politicians, and I am equally willing to bet you were not generally aware of the opposition to these decisions on the part of the majority of religious communities. To the extent you were unaware is testimony to how successfully the culture has domesticated the prophetic witness of our faith, for it is not simply of matter of what the witness of our faith is, it is a question of what kind of witness we are willing and able to hear. On the face of it, to contort the message of the Prince of Peace so severely that war becomes a legitimate means of bringing in God's new age is to have entirely lost both the sense of cross-bearing and yoke-bearing. It is to have surrendered the soul to a different kind of faith.

Paul addresses this kind of amnesia and perversion of purpose and ministry. "The good that I would do, I do not do...the evil that I would not do, I do." This binary nature of will and desire is deeply embedded within each of us, so that at our best we are as though in league with our worst. Throughout his letter to the Romans, Paul perseveres with relentless passion the understanding that sin – like it or not, will it or not – is woven into the fabric of our wills and our wants, and no lengthy list of do's and don'ts, no self-hating asceticism, no rigorous discipline of heart and mind can save us from its effects.

Again, given that this is Independence Day weekend, let's connect this to our national life. Paul Elie, writing in *The Atlantic* last fall, remembered some insights from Reinhold Niebuhr, theologian of the early-to-mid 20th century. In regard to war, Niebuhr was no pacifist. He argued the necessity of confronting Hitler and articulated what came to be called theological realism which walked the knife edge between the brutal realities of the world versus the ideal demands of Christian hope.

Elie writes, "The irony of American history, as Niebuhr explained it, is that our virtues and our vices are inextricably joined. ...Our prosperity leads us to believe 'that our society is so essentially virtuous that only malice could prompt criticism of any of our actions.' Yet... our power, ironically, has undermined our virtue, for 'the same technical efficiency which provided our comforts has also placed us at the center of tragic developments in world events,' bringing about a 'historic situation in which the paradise of our domestic security is suspended in a hell of global insecurity.'"

In such an insecure world, it is clear why we would prefer the offer of Christ to give us rest, to accept the easy yoke, the light burden. The problem, though, is that the rest he would give is for the disciples who would serve. The yoke that is easy is for those who are weary from cross-bearing. The kingdom of surprise and hope is for the citizens of God's new age which is built upon Christ's and his follower's sacrifice. Thus, here is one more binary twist: there is no satisfaction at the end without the dissatisfaction at the beginning.

A story has come down from Soren Kierkegaard about a fireman. "Everybody in town loved the fireman because he was a kind and gentle man. One day he got on the fire truck with the other firemen and headed to the blazing inferno – a building being consumed in flames. The fireman saw about 500 townspeople there with little water pistols in their hands. Smiling at one another, they were going 'squirt-squirt, squirt-squirt.' The fireman asked the people what they were doing. They replied, 'We all believe in what you are doing and we each came to make our little contribution – squirt-squirt.' The fireman shouted, 'Get out of here. This is no place for well-

meaning people who want to make a contribution; this is a place for people who are ready to die to put out the flames.'

"Take up your cross," the man said. "Take my yoke upon you," he said. There is purpose for life there. There is a transcendence from the deadening compromises of the culture there. In all that there is hope that we will actually be able to participate in God's surprise.

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