

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Matthew 16:21-28

From that time on, 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, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said 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." 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. 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? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Sermon Message for August 30, 2020
St. Luke's and Pleasant Street UMC's, Derry and Salem, NH
Pastor Ben Daggett

Setting our minds on things divine.

This week's reading brings us to another powerful exchange between Jesus and Peter. Let's have a quick recap as to where we are in the story. A few weeks ago we explored the feeding of the 5,000, and Jesus' call for us to feast at his table as well, to be blessed and broken. Then the following week we examined Jesus' words to his disciples, when they are out in the wind and waves of the Sea of Galilee, straining at the oars: "Take heart!" he says, "I am. Be not afraid." We looked at Peter's response to that call, how he walks out on the waters to where Jesus is, his eager trust in God to do the impossible, and his immediate and desperate realization of his utter dependence on Jesus to stay above the waves, to be saved. Then, we admired the humble faith of the Canaanite woman, who persevered for love's sake, despite the risks involved, despite the shame endured for crossing the strict ethnic, religious, and social bounds of their day. She partakes of God's blessing, by faith, through Christ, while the disciples look on in astonishment. The narrative takes us from there to many healings in another Gentile region in the modern-day Golan Heights, and then to the feeding of the 4,000, a mostly Gentile crowd. Matthew tells of another confrontation with the Pharisees, a discussion about yeast and bread with the disciples, and then, while we focused on Romans last week for our exploration, the gospel reading gave the account of Peter's great confession, his declaration that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus blesses him for his revelation, since he would not have known it unless the Father had shown him. He prophesies over Peter's life, calling him the Rock, and he then tells the disciples, sternly, that they are to remain silent as to Jesus' true identity as God's anointed King.

Our passage today gives us some insight as to why Jesus did not want the disciples to disclose their knowledge, and we will explore that shortly, but first let's have a look at the context of these words, to peel back the layers of this amazing text.

Consider with me for a moment how the disciples must have responded to the sudden realization and unabashed disclosure that Jesus is the Messiah, what would have been an astounding discovery and awesome truth for them to absorb. For the disciples and Jesus, the geographical location of the land they walked had been and was even then a crossroads between larger empires who, more often than not, spent their energies and resources at war with the Jews and with one another. Not so much has changed in that sense, in the present day. The Jews, or the people of Israel as you may hear them called, lived in a land surrounded by enemies: Egyptians, Canaanites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Edomites and many many others, all vying for control over this amazingly beautiful and fertile stretch of land, which was a major trading hub. It had been that way for centuries.

And generation after generation of Jews, as recorded in the Bible, therefore confront the struggles of perpetual warfare, devastation, loss, exile, return, foreign oppression, victory, defeat, injustice; ever and always forming the backdrop to the Bible's stories is the people's quest to keep some measure of a tenuous hold on the land and its bounty, in conflict with powers wealthier and more technologically advanced than they. But among these stories runs the persistent and stubborn theme of God's faithfulness and determination to bless this tiny nation, and in so doing demonstrate to the nations around it and to the world the glory of God, the unshakeable love of God, even in the midst of tragedy, calamity, and death. And so, because of their particular history with God, the people of Israel have a view of themselves as being chosen by God in a unique way, in covenant with God to carry out his purposes on earth, since God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and had shown them a new way of being in the world, through what was known as the Law, or Torah, granted to the people from

God by way of their great lawgiver and prophet, Moses. The Jews are not chosen because they are unique, but unique because they are chosen. The God of the Jews is Yahweh, the one true God, the center of their worship is the Temple, in Jerusalem, and as you no doubt know, Jesus is Jewish.

Think of the disciples, then, as they walked along with this Jesus, whom they had set out to follow. The Messiah! After 400 years of prophetic silence, and generations of Jews who had lived whole lives and had died hoping for the promise withheld, they, the twelve, were indeed in the very presence of the Anointed One, the long-prophesied, awaited, hoped-for king, who would set things right for Israel, would vanquish the hated Gentile oppressors, and establish the rightful reign of YHWH on earth, with justice and righteousness as his mantle. Together, they would march into Jerusalem with conquering armies of angels, drive out the foreign invaders, destroy all the corrupt, evil extortioners, and expel them and Jesus would suffer greatly at the hands of the high priests and scribes, be killed, and on the third day be raised? Wait, what was that last part about you dying and being raised, Jesus? Jesus' telling the disciples that he would suffer and die would have been shocking to them at the very least, considering their expectations of Messianic reign on earth.

Peter pulls him aside and attempts to correct him, since Jesus surely had gotten the story wrong, saying to him, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." "Get behind me Satan!" says Jesus. "You are a stumbling block to me;" Jesus had called Peter the Rock a short time earlier, a wordplay with his name in the Greek and Aramaic, sort of how, like in English we call people "Rocky." Now, this phrase "stumbling block" is another play on words. Peter is now a stumbling "stone." Jesus continues: "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

A short time earlier, Jesus commends Peter for his capacity to hear from the Father in heaven. Now, he rebukes him in the harshest of terms, for setting his mind on the things of the earth.

I would like to offer a brief aside to say I find it encouraging to know that Jesus' disciples take so long to understand what's going on. Remember, these men were walking and talking with, learning about life from the Author of Life, God incarnate, and still it was difficult for them to get it. With that knowledge, I feel I'm not alone in my searching, questing, my struggling to understand what it is to live out this life with Christ. Even though I can be very slow to catch on, Jesus continues to lead and correct me, at times knock some sense into me, and transform me with the patience of eternity, just as he did with the disciples.

We had asked the question as to why Jesus would want the disciples to remain silent about his claim to be the Messiah. We have our answer right here, in the lines of the text just following, when Peter confronts Jesus to say he must never die a humiliating death at the hands of the scribes and Pharisees. Peter's rebuking of Jesus here reveals that he and the disciples were still bound to their own mistaken understanding of what Jesus' being the Messiah really meant, and if they who had walked so closely with him all those days and weeks, close to three years by then, were as yet unclear as to his true mission and purpose on earth, if they were even ready to stand in the way of Jesus' doing his work, how much less comprehending would be the crowds, if the crowds came to hear and believe that Jesus was the Messiah. God reveals wisdom by degrees, and in the proper time.

As we know from later on in the story, the disciples still needed to, as yet, come to the utter end of themselves, when they all would either betray, deny, desert, or otherwise fall short of walking the way that Jesus had called them to. Each of them would ultimately have to reckon with their failure, and come to grips with the plain fact that Jesus' way is not lived out through human striving and effort, but by humility, brokenness before God and one another, by grace.

Immediately after confronting Peter, Jesus tells the other 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. 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?”

To become Jesus’ followers, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. If we want to follow Jesus, we are called to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. Put another way, Jesus calls his followers to die with him, that in dying we might truly live.

Author Roy Hession offers so much insight here, with such crystalline clarity from his book *The Calvary Road*,¹ that I am going to quote him extensively, to help us unpack these ideas. He writes, “Jesus is always victorious. In heaven they are praising Him all the time for His victory. Whatever may be our experience of failure and barrenness, He is never defeated. His power is boundless. And we, on our part, have only to get into a right relationship with Him, and we shall see His power being demonstrated in our hearts and lives and service, and victorious life will fill us and overflow through us to others.

He continues, “If, however, we are to come into this right relationship with Him, the first thing we must learn is that our wills must be broken to His will. To be broken is the beginning of Revival. It is painful, humiliating, but it is the only way. It is being ‘Not I, but Christ’ (Gal 2:20), and a ‘C’ is a bent ‘I.’ The Lord Jesus cannot live in us fully and reveal Himself through [us] until the proud self within us is broken. This simply means that the hard unyielding self, which justifies itself, wants its own way, stands up for its rights, and seeks its own glory, at last bows its head to God's will, admits its wrong, gives up its own way to Jesus, surrenders its rights and discards its own glory - that the Lord Jesus might have all and be all. In other words it is dying to self and self-attitudes.”

¹ Downloaded from <http://www.christianissues.biz/revival.html> © 1950 Roy Hession Book Trust, England - Available here by their kind permission

This hard self is the very self that Peter exhibits in rebuking Jesus to say, “God forbid you should undergo such suffering, Lord!” to which Christ tells him he is setting his mind not on divine things but on human things. How much do we do the same? (And I am very much including myself here.)

“As we look honestly at our Christian lives, we can see how much of this self there is in each of us. It is so often self who tries to live the Christian life (the mere fact that we use the word 'try' indicates that it is self who has the responsibility). It is self, too, who is often doing Christian work. It is always self who gets irritable and envious and resentful and critical and worried. It is self who is hard and unyielding in its attitudes to others. It is self who is shy and self-conscious and reserved. No wonder we need breaking. As long as self is in control, God can do little with us, for all the fruits of the Spirit [...], with which God longs to fill us, are the complete antithesis of the hard, unbroken spirit within us and presupposes that it has been crucified.”

It is this very self, when made central to the human experience, a process then multiplied billions of times over among large groups of people, expanded out into systems and structures, that ultimately gives rise to the very kinds of injustice and affliction that so characterized the days and times the disciples, and Jesus, were living. I would reckon to say there is some resonance for our times as well. But, for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem as conquering King to overthrow the Romans, as Peter may have envisioned here (or we may think of James and John, who wanted Jesus, like Elijah, to rain fire down from heaven on a Samaritan village) would only have perpetuated the very distortion and corruption that Jesus has come, has lived, has died, to overcome. That the glory of God may be manifest in the foolishness of men.

Hession writes, “Being broken is both God's work and ours. He brings His pressure to bear, but we have to make the choice. If we are really open to

conviction as we seek fellowship with God (and willingness for the light is the prime condition of fellowship with God), God will show us the expressions of this proud, hard self that cause Him pain. Then it is, we can stiffen our necks and refuse to repent or we can bow the head and say, "Yes, Lord." Brokenness in daily experience is simply the response of humility to the conviction of God. And inasmuch as this conviction is continuous, we shall need to be broken continually. And this can be very costly, when we see all the yielding of rights and selfish interests that this will involve, and the confessions and restitutions that may be sometimes necessary.

“For this reason, we are not likely to be broken except at the Cross of Jesus. The willingness of Jesus to be broken for us is the all-compelling motive in our being broken too. We see Him, Who is in the form of God, counting not equality with God a prize to be grasped at and hung on to, but letting it go for us and taking upon Him the form of a Servant - God's Servant, [a] Servant [to humanity]. We see Him willing to have no rights of His own, no home of His own, no possessions of His own, willing to let men revile Him and not revile again, willing to let men tread on Him and not retaliate or defend Himself. Above all, we see Him broken as He meekly goes to Calvary to become men's scapegoat by bearing their sins in His own body on the Tree.”

This is the way of the cross: dying to self, that Christ might live in us. It is in light of the cross that all of Jesus' teachings -- love for enemies, genuine love, blessing those who persecute you, perseverance in hope and prayer, doing unto others as you would have them do unto you -- all of these actions can only be expressed as a result of the refining, transforming process of bringing our whole selves before God and confessing our ways as sinful and wrong, and yielding to the radiant, glorious love of God as displayed in Christ, to make us new.

“People imagine that dying to self makes one miserable. But it[’s] just the opposite. It is the refusal to die to self that makes one miserable. The more we know of death with Him, the more we shall know of His life in us, and so the more of real peace and joy.”

As we close I would invite you to again consider the disciples, who, though they were slow to understand, and though each of them had to confront his or her own failings, after they had seen Jesus take up his cross and walk his path of pain and suffering, after they had seen him in Gethsemane, seen him yield to the Father’s will, seen him silent before his accusers, seen him forgiving his murderers as they were in the very act of killing him, these same disciples would go on, later in the story, to boldly announce his victory and grace, and before long a whole movement in Jesus’ name would turn the ancient world upside down. So much so that 2,000 years later we still behold this character in history and marvel at his life and teachings, his death and New Life, which can also be our life, if we take up our cross and follow him, this Jesus of Nazareth.

As Paul exclaims, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”

Hallelujah! Amen.