

"Three Questions"

Mark 8:27-38

17 September 2006

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'

²⁹He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

Prayer.

Tell me something; why should any of us be concerned with Peter's opinion about who Jesus was? I mean, that was two thousand years ago, in a different language and culture and half a world away. Why should we care about what the opinionated Peter has to say?

Answer: what we believe about Jesus has everything to do with how God relates to us. Our beliefs make a difference.

I see far too many people today to hold faith and religion at arm's length; don't want to get involved, don't want to dive in too deep, don't want their lives

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radically challenged or changed. This is not only an indictment, but I must admit, it is also confessional. I, too, like to keep control over my world, to lead a disciplined spirit life, to walk a predictable spiritual journey, to minimize the risk of upsetting the apple cart or disrupting the status quo.

Then, the unthinkable happens. Crisis happens and people cry crocodile tears, petition others for pity, asking “where was God?”

I think to myself, behind my kind, non-judgmental pastoral facade, “perhaps God is right where you've left him these past twenty years- still packed away and stored in the attic of your soul.”

What we believe about God does make a difference in the way that God responds to us, especially when we find ourselves in need or want. The worst time to start a relationship with God is when you're in a foxhole and the lead is flying. The best time to exercise your relationship with God is to start today; get back to prayer, return to a routine of scripture reading and devotionals, challenge yourself to become the hands of Christ, even in some small way, and jump back in to a mission or ministry.

Question number 2; why does Jesus repeatedly foretell his disciples about his death and resurrection?

Answer: so that his followers would never lose hope.

Hindsight tells us that resurrection followed Jesus' death on a cross and burial in a tomb for three days. Jesus' disciples and larger audience didn't have this same hindsight. Jesus didn't want them to lose hope when they would become witnesses of his passion and death.

It is just as important today, as it was at the time of Jesus – God doesn't want us to lose hope. Without hope, without vision, without a plan for the future ... people wither and die. As we grow older we become increasingly aware of our own mortality – we see the death of peers, we come to life passages like retirement, we begin to have increasing numbers of health concerns – it becomes more and more difficult to maintain hope.

It is my observation that those who don't take hope seriously are the ones who lose it first. Those who become intentional and disciplined in keeping hope, maintaining hope, growing hope these are the people who truly thrive.

Hope keeps us alive, especially hope that is rooted in a walk with Jesus. When we

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can look to Jesus, make the connection with his life, passion and death, then we, too, might find hope in the struggles of our daily living.

One last thing; tell me why Jesus encourages his followers to lose our lives to gain them, to deny ourselves and to take up our cross?

Answer: when we live for Jesus, we lose the self.

Let's be completely honest. The largest barrier to a life with Christ is our own ego. The world tells us to develop ourselves; to grow in our status, position, influence, authority, and wealth. The world tells us that value comes from comfort, the accumulation of things, and the ability to live a life of excess. The world tells us that "if we can, we should." The world tells us to idolize the family (note: the operative word "idolize").

But this is not the message of Jesus.

Disciples of Christ are called to live for Christ and to die for Christ, and to leave the details up to God.

The great scholar and author, Henri Nouwen, recognized this in his own life – but it took him a life-time to get there. He had earned a PhD, commanded the highest profiles on the lecture circuit, held the most prestigious positions in the best universities, wrote prolifically, he had become ... only to find himself lost.

It took him a while to re-discover that when we live for Christ we lose the self. In his final years, Nouwen gave it all away; he became a personal care assistant, taking care of developmentally disabled individuals in a residential home in Toronto.

I must admit, this, too, is a struggle I wrestle with, as I suspect it is for you, too. Ego gets in the way of our walk with Christ. "In what ways," I ask myself, "can I focus what I say and what I do more and more upon the God who I've come to know, love, and experience, and less and less upon myself?" In my ideal imagination I visualize myself growing smaller and smaller, less and less significant, all-the-while Jesus grows larger and larger, until one day, I will be gone and only Jesus will remain.

This is where true fulfillment and satisfaction will be found.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me this day. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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