

Put Down Your Feet

A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 28th, 2011
Jeremiah 15:15-21; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

“. . . Thus says the LORD: . . .
If you utter what is precious, and not what
is worthless,
you shall be as my mouth.
They shall turn to you,
but you shall not turn to them.
And I will make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,
but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you,
declares the Lord.”

Several years ago I came across a little saying that I thought was worth posting on my study door just inside the church office. Right next to a rather forlorn looking Snoopy from the *Peanuts* cartoon strip, who’s wearing a headdress with hatchet in hand, is a caption about leadership that reads, “The trouble with being a leader these days is that you can’t be sure whether people are following you or chasing you.”

It seems like a question that may have been on Jesus’ mind last Sunday when he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” and then again, “Who do you say that I am?”
“Are they following me, or are they chasing me?”

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We’ve known from the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel that there are people who are definitely chasing Jesus, or as the LORD says to Jeremiah, “fighting against him.” At Christmas we heard that, together with the Pharisees and scribes, King Herod went so far as to commit infanticide in order to chase down “the newborn king” of the Jews who had to flee with his parents to Egypt.

Along the way, we’ve seen that opposition to Jesus has been building ever since John the Baptist called the Pharisees and scribes a “brood of vipers.” A few chapters ago, earlier this summer, Jesus was charged by the authorities with blasphemy and collusion with Beelzebul, the prince of demons.

So, when Jesus predicts that “he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed . . .,” well, we’ve seen it coming.

However, the people in the story, especially Jesus’ disciples, have not seen it coming, nor do they understand what it means for Jesus to be “the Messiah, [the anointed One], the Son of the living God.” In fact, Peter’s confession of the Messiah is so different from Jesus’ prediction for the Messiah that last week he called Simon “Rock” and this week he calls him *scandalon* (literally “a scandal”), a “stumbling block.” “Peter the Rock” quickly becomes “Peter the Block.” And we hear that Peter has his mind set not on divine things but on human things.

Jesus concludes that the way to life goes straight through death: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”

“. . . They will fight against you,” the LORD tells Jeremiah, “but they shall not prevail over

you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you. . . .”

When you think about it, so much of our lives are devoted to saving them, hanging on to them, ensuring them, keeping them for ourselves, making sure that nothing goes wrong. We regret so much the past. We worry so much about the future. Rarely, if ever, do experience the moment, living in “the now,” which is really all we have. Think what great freedom there would be in losing our lives in Jesus, commending everything into the hands of the Almighty God, hitting bottom where so many others have finally found abundant life.

I was listening to *The Tavis Smiley Show* the other night when he had as his guest the daughter of Rabbi Abraham Heschel who was a close friend to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and walked with King on many of the Civil Rights marches. The conversation that evening wasn’t focused so much on the Civil Rights Movement as it was on King’s Vietnam speech at Riverside Church in New York City not long before his assassination.

As I listened to the conversation, I learned that the speech was very carefully crafted and one of the few speeches which King delivered word-for-word from his manuscript. He was especially concerned not to ally himself with the more radical anti-war elements, but he felt strongly that he had to say something because of the devastating impact of the war on the people he had struggled so valiantly to liberate.

The thing that struck me again during the conversation was how alive was the nation during those years and how so many people were called to “lose their lives” in causes so much greater than living for themselves, even members and especially leadership of the northern mainline churches and other religious communities. And even though I attended college and then seminary years after these movements had crested, many of us who eventually would be ordained were drawn by those powerful waves to “lose ourselves” to urban ministries in some of the poorest, toughest neighborhoods of the nation’s cities.

I often wonder these days where in our land is there anything remotely similar that could potentially inspire such vitality, such “losing one’s life” in something beyond ourselves. Somewhere along the way our souls have died in the trough of self-protection and self-consumption.

There once was a seeker who tried to find himself but was never successful. Then he tried to find God but could not find God. Finally, the seeker pursued the good of his neighbor and there, in his neighbor, he found all three: himself, his neighbor and God. “And Jesus answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.’”

Twenty-eight years ago on another Sunday, August 28th, 1983, on the cover of an ordination worship folder, appeared the words of a prayer ascribed to St. Francis of Assisi:

*O Lord, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled but to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that I receive;
It is in pardoning that I am pardoned;
And it is in dying that I am born to eternal
life. Amen.*

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Jesus says in John 12 that “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.”

“. . . It is in dying that I am born to eternal life.”

Some of you know what it means to “walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” The psalmist says that in that valley, “I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me, Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.”

“. . . They will fight against you,” Jeremiah is told, “but they shall not prevail over you, for *I am with you* to save you and deliver you. . . .”

There’s an Appalachian mountain tale in which an old, wizened man is fishing on the bank of a mossy pond when a young child suddenly falls into the water not far from the old man. The child immediately begins to thrash about, screaming for help, panicking that he is about to drown. The old man continues undisturbed, sitting quietly on the bank, watching his fishing line bob up and down in the wake of the boy’s thrashing.

As the little boy continues flailing and crying for help, finally the old man looks away from his fishing pole and gruffly says to the child, “Quit your splashing around, boy; just relax and put down your feet for a second.” The boy manages to let go, puts down his feet, and since the pond is only three or four feet deep, he touches the bottom and madly dashes to the shore.

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Most days of our lives, we experience smooth sailing, but then there are storms, the sky turns dark, and the sea threatens. It is there, Matthew says, that Jesus comes to us, calls to us, and says to us, “Don't be afraid, it is I.”

Like many of you, I receive my share of “forwarded” email messages of various sorts ranging from the comic, to the sentimental, to the nostalgic, to the mind-bending, to the political, and, of course, especially the religious. This past week, I received one which, for me, was surprisingly moving. Maybe some of you have seen it:

“A voyaging ship was wrecked during a storm at sea and only two of the men on it were able to swim to a small, desert-like island. The two survivors, not knowing what else to do, agreed that they had no other recourse but to pray to God; but in order to find out whose prayer was more effective, they agreed to divide the territory between them and stay on opposite sides of the island.

“The first thing they prayed for was food. The next morning, the first man saw a fruit-bearing tree on his side of the island, and he was able to eat his fill. The other man's parcel of land remained barren.

“After a week, the first man was lonely and he decided to pray for a wife. Sure enough, the next day . . . a woman swam to his side of the island; but on the other side of the island, there was no one.

“Soon the first man prayed for a house, some clothes, more food; and the next day, all these were given to him, but the second man still had nothing.

“Finally, the first man prayed for a ship so that he and his wife could leave the island. In the morning, he found a cruise-liner docked at his side of the island.

“The first man boarded the ship with his wife and decided to leave the second man on the

island. He considered the other man unworthy to receive God's blessings, since none of the second man's prayers had been answered.

"As the ship was about to leave, the first man heard a voice whispering, 'Why are you leaving your friend on the island?'"

"My blessings are mine alone, since I was the one who prayed for them,' the first man answered. 'None of his prayers were answered, and so he doesn't deserve anything.'

"You're mistaken!' the voice answered. 'He had only one prayer, which I answered. And, if not for that prayer, you would not have received anything.'

"Tell me,' the first man asked, 'what did he pray for that I should owe him anything?'"

"The voice answered, 'He prayed that all of *your* prayers would be answered.'"

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