

What The...?

February 14, 2021

Bendersville and Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 16:24-17:9

So, if I were to be perfectly honest, the story of the Transfiguration is one of my least-favorite stories in the whole Bible to preach. I remember when I was in college, I was in the university chaplain's office and we were planning chapel services for the week of Transfiguration, and he made the comment that in all of his 30+ years of ministry he had never heard a *good* transfiguration sermon, and he had certainly never preached a good one.

And after more than a decade of looking at this story every single year and wrestling with it every single year, I think I can see why. It is a hard passage. It's hard to preach, it's hard to hear, it's hard to understand, and it is hard for us to apply. So, with all that being said, right now I am instructing you to lower your expectations of the next 20 minutes by about 5 bars.

Here's the thing, though. This is a really challenging passage of scripture. But in some ways, I think it was meant to be. Jesus is way beyond the point now of throwing his disciples soft balls. The challenge of discipleship and the difficulty of the call to follow Christ is about to get really real. And Jesus needs to make sure his disciples are ready for what is soon to follow.

Up until this point in Matthew's gospel, we've been hanging out in a lot of really fun stories. The wise men. John the Baptist. Jesus being tempted in the desert. The Sermon on the Mount. Parables. Stories. Word Pictures. Miracles – the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on water (and inviting Peter to do the same). So far, in Matthew's gospel we've seen Jesus' compassion, and his power. We've seen him speaking words of profound hope to the down-and-out. We've seen him using the language of the people – the language of farming – planting crops and harvesting – to describe to them what the kingdom of God is like. And last week, we saw that even on Jesus's worst days when it seems like he should have nothing left, he shows up anyway as God creates beauty out of nothingness and fills our empty cups to overflowing. We've seen Jesus teach, and heal, and feed. And if we stopped here, the picture of discipleship that we get would really be a lovely one. To follow Christ means that we get to have a part in the beautiful, wondrous things that Christ does. Like feeding the multitudes and healing the sick and walking on water.

But Matthew's gospel doesn't stop here. It continues on. And starting with today's reading, the whole rest of the gospel starts to take on a very different tone. A much

more serious tone. It's not like Jesus wasn't serious before, but at least most of the time it seemed like at the very least he was having fun doing what he was doing.

But today we reach the midpoint of the book of Matthew and we see a shift – starting toward the end of chapter 16, and then continuing in chapter 17 through the story of the Transfiguration. Something happens in this passage that changes the direction of the whole gospel story.

So, what's going on?

Since we last saw Jesus, he has spent a good bit of time putting out little fires with the Pharisees and the Sadducees; he has performed more miracles – he healed the Canaanite woman's daughter and he fed another group of thousands of people. He asks his disciples "who do the people say that I am," and Peter responds with a powerful statement of faith – "You are the messiah, the son of the living God!"

The disciples are living up every moment of following Jesus. The teachings, the miracles, the healings, the "sticking it" to the religious leaders – with Jesus, there is never a dull moment. The power and the mercy and the compassion of God is on full display, right in front of them, every single day. They couldn't imagine being anywhere else or doing anything else. They could keep this up for the rest of their lives.

But then, at the end of chapter 16, Jesus startles them. When everything is going so well and Jesus is on fire, and the disciples are on fire, Jesus starts saying some really weird, concerning things. Telling the disciples that before much longer he is going to die. Be handed over. He will suffer. And be killed. And then raised to life.

This wasn't part of the plan. The disciples didn't like Jesus talking this way. Jesus was above life – if he could heal the sick and calm the storms and multiply food, there was nothing Jesus could not do. Jesus could be the answer to *all* of their problems. That's what he came for, after all – right?

And so Peter jumps in – Peter, who Jesus had just praised for his deep and powerful faith – and he says "you can't talk like that, Jesus. I know that the Pharisees may have rattled you a little bit, but you're young! You have a long life ahead of you! And there is so much more that you can and will do! Let's just not talk about things like death. It's not healthy."

And in that moment, it's like a switch flipped and Jesus went from "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, and on this rock I will build my church," to "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block." And then, Jesus continues: "If any want to be my disciples, they must take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it. And whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."

The word here that we have translated “life” is an interesting one. In New Testament Greek, there are actually three different words that we translate into our English word *life*. The first word is *bios*. Meaning our physical lives; our physical bodies; the physical act of living and breathing and walking on the earth. It’s from this word that we get the word *biology*. Humans, and other animals, and plants all have *bios*.

The second word is *zoe*. In the New Testament, *zoe* is only ever used to refer to the life of God. Not a physical life that comes and goes, but a life that is beyond all life. In John chapter 1, “in Jesus was life – *zoe* – and the life was the light of men.” And in John 10 – I have come that they may have life – *zoe* – and have life abundantly.” I have come that they might share in the life of God.

And then, there is a third word: *psuche*. And this is the word that is used here at the end of Matthew 16. *Psuche* refers not to our physical bodies, but to our deepest selves. Our souls, our spirits, some might say our minds. *Psuche* goes a lot deeper than *bios* – because the body can die and decay, but it is our *psuche* – our soul – the essence of who we are – that will endure and experience the joy of God’s *zoe*.

When Jesus tells the disciples “whoever wants to save their life – *psuche* – will lose it, and whoever loses their *psuche* for my sake will find it,” Jesus is not talking here about the disciples physically being willing to lay down their lives. He’s talking about something much, much deeper. Something that gets to the deepest core of who the disciples are, and their motivations for following him.

“It’s been a lot of fun hanging out with me,” Jesus is telling them. Miracles and healings and listening to me “tell it like it is” – that’s fun. You’ve no doubt got some high hopes and high expectations. Maybe you are hoping that I am going to be the answer to all of your problems. Maybe you think that I’m your “life insurance” policy – that if you get sick, or if you trip and fall and hit your head against a rock, I am going to step in and heal you. Maybe you think that as long as you are with me, you will always have food to eat and wine to drink. Maybe you think that I am going to overthrow the Roman government and re-establish Israel’s independence.

But here’s the truth about discipleship – and the truth about life in God: As long as you are approaching discipleship for “what you can get out of it,” you are missing the point entirely. If I am simply a means to an end for you, your focus is not on God. It is on yourself. And with your focus always on yourself, you will never experience the fullness of what God has created you for.

“To be who you are,” Jesus is telling us, “to be who God created you to be, ultimately means *losing* who you are in something greater than yourself. If you continue making yourself the focus of your own life, you will ultimately end up losing yourself in a way

that is not lifegiving. But in surrendering yourself – your longings – your preferences – your hopes – your expectations – into the hands of God, that is when you will truly discover who you are.”

And it is in *that context* that we see the story of the transfiguration. Jesus takes Peter and James and John up the mountain. And when they are standing on top of the mountain, Jesus begins to shine brightly, like the sun. And then two big heroes of the faith, Moses and Elijah, come and stand there with him.

The three disciples are just kinda standing there, gobsmacked. They are not part of the conversation; they don't know exactly what is going on. Peter tries jumping into the conversation and playing “buddy buddy” with the three of them – “Moses, old friend! Great to see you! If you'd like, I'm happy to pitch a tent for you! Pull up a chair! Stay awhile!”

And that's when God “shushes” Peter. He makes a cloud descend upon Jesus and Moses and Elijah, so that the disciples can't see them anymore, and the voice of God booms out, “This is my son, whom I love. *Listen to him.*” Next thing the disciples know, they are face-down on the ground, terrified, and Jesus – now alone and no longer glowing – comes and touches them. “It's okay. You can get up. You don't have to be afraid. Oh – and what happens on this mountain stays on this mountain.”

So what in the world just happened?

Here at this pivot point in the gospel, things are just about to get rough. Jesus is setting his face toward Jerusalem and the rest of the gospel story is going to focus on Jesus journeying toward his death. It's about to get dark. And it is going to get hard – for Jesus and the disciples. Jesus has just warned the disciples that this path of discipleship will be profoundly lifegiving – but *only* if they can set themselves aside and allow God to do some hard work within them and around them. And they are not always going to like what this work entails.

But it is not all for nothing. Because they are a part of something bigger than themselves. Bigger than they can even comprehend. Here on this mountain they catch just the tiniest little sliver of a glimpse of the glory of God and it is so beautiful and so terrifying that they can't handle it. But they also want more of it. They want to linger up there on that mountain where God's voice booms out, instead of going down the mountain where life is hard and where there is a cross that they must bear.

And this is exactly what we see throughout our journeys of faith. We have seasons when we are basically just “going through the motions” – when we are maybe walking with God, but only on this really surface level. We might come to church, we might read scripture, we might pray, we might even witness God doing some pretty amazing things.

But in these times – when life is going pretty well and we are generally pretty content, we naturally become so focused on ourselves that we don't allow God to do the deep work of changing us from the inside-out. We lose sight of who God is, and without even realizing it, we also lose sight of who we are.

And then, we have those seasons when God surprises us. Rattles us. Maybe even upsets us. Oftentimes, these moments come at crisis points in life, or during life's challenges. And in these seasons we realize that maybe it is not all about us. And maybe it would be wise of us to hand over the reins to God because we clearly don't know what we are doing. And we release a little bit of our own lives – our own souls – our *psuche* – into God's life – God's *zoe*. And at these moments, when we lose ourselves in the grace of God, that's when we find ourselves coming face-to-face with little glimpses of God's glory and hope and promise – God's life – that strengthens us so that we can take up our cross and face whatever comes next.

Friends, God never told us that the lives that we live will be easy. In fact, just the opposite. Jesus promised us that we would face challenges, and struggles, and even death. Jesus told us that there would come times when we would need to lay down some of what we cling to, in order that our hearts and our minds and our eyes might be open and ready to receive the abundant, glorious life that God offers.

So let me ask you today: As you prepare to take up your cross and follow Christ; as you prepare to catch glimpses of God's beauty on display for all the world; as you step into the abundant life that God has prepared for you today – what is it that you need to let go of? What is it within you that is weighing you down and focusing your *psuche* – your heart – your soul – your mind – on something other than God? And can you, just for today, release that? Release it into the hands of God so that God can reveal to all of us what life in the kingdom of God is *really* like?