

Matthew 16:21-28

16:21 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.

16:22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

16:23 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."

16:24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

16:25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

16:26 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?

16:27 "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.

16:28 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."

Romans 12:9-21

12:9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

12:10 Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

12:11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

12:12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

12:13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

12:16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

12:17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

12:18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

12:19 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."

12:20 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."

12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Proclamation of the Word

As I sat to put pen to paper or more accurately fingers to keyboard to prepare this sermon, I checked Facebook first. Trending on Facebook on Friday was a video titled "Bill Cosby Responds to Victoria Osteen." She is wife and co-pastor with Joel Osteen of a Houston mega church. Of course as I have told you before, Bill Cosby was my TV Father when he played Cliff Huxtable on the Cosby Show in the 1980's.

Camera closes in on her speaking to a packed house of thousands perhaps. Here is what she says,

I want to encourage each of us when we obey God, we are not doing it for God...we're doing it for ourselves. God takes pleasure when we're happy...

Do good for your own self

Do good because God wants you to be happy.

When we come to church, when you worship him, you're not doing it for God really, you're doing it for yourself, because that's what makes God happy.

Then we see Bill Cosby saying, "Now that's the dumbest thing I have ever heard in my life!"

Someone has cleverly spliced a clip from the Cosby show. He did not really respond to her, but the point is made. In our day, everyone is a critic and mad at something so I hate to add to the negativity, but Cosby is right, "That's the dumbest thing I have ever heard in my life."

Jesus summed up the Law, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself, not "Love yourself with all your heart, mind, and strength, and love yourself as you love yourself." We live in a narcissistic society and bad theology sometimes feeds our self-centeredness. That is not to say, that when we worship, study, and serve, we will not find healing, peace, meaning, and joy.

Our readings from Scripture today counter her feel-good wisdom.

When Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, he tells his disciples that he must undergo great suffering. 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." (Matthew 16:24-25)

Peter, the one upon whom God will build God's church, is shocked. Surely not, he says. Peter, the Rock, is called *satan* which is a name meaning, "deceiver." Even Peter does not understand what Jesus means about suffering for the sake of God's love.

In Paul's letter to the church at Rome, you may remember from last week that he calls us to be "living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God." We are to please God and pour out our life in the way that God has shown us in Jesus. True worship according to Romans 12 is a life of self-giving love and service. We are a part of the one body of Christ. And all members are valued. Paul reminds us that we are redeemed, reconciled, so that our whole lives are a response to God's grace and love poured out in Jesus the Christ. These are the 3 R's Redeemed, Reconciled, and Response. Romans 12 and following is HOW we respond to the good news! And frankly Paul does not speak of personal happiness, he speaks of living sacrifice. Contrary to Ms. Osteen says, we worship God to honor and love God, not for our happiness. Then we love others in God's name.

Think of Romans 12 as our covenant. Or in my experience at Presbyterian College we had an Honor Code which governed our community life. A covenant is a sort of honor code. *Covenant* is a faith word that describes binding promises made between two parties. For instance in our tradition, we understand Marriage to be a covenant- promises made before God and with the covenant community of faith. Our youth understand making covenants because when they attend a Youth Conference or retreat, they are usually placed in small groups for the event. And their group creates a covenant that guides how they are to care for one another.

Pastor Rochelle Stackhouseⁱ describes creating a covenant with 60 teenagers at her confirmation retreat. The covenant would govern their behavior as a Christian community for the 3 day weekend. The group busted out in laughter when one teen shouted, "No drama!" Other suggestions followed: *Do not talk when others are talking. Respect the leaders. Participate in all activities.* When the page was filled, each one came forward to sign his or her name. When I have been at Youth Conferences we have a way to keep the covenant together. People will say, "covenant check" to remind each other when they are not abiding by the covenant. When the person calls someone a name, another teen may say "covenant check" to remind the teen that they agreed to respect each other.

Romans 12 is setting covenant life expectations for the members at First Church, Rome and for us today. Did you notice how he starts? Paul begins, *Let love be genuine....* He begins with love. Another way to sum up the whole story of salvation is written in 1 John..."We love because God first loved us." Is that not the whole truth of the good news summed up? The gospel in one word is LOVE. All the rest flows from that. When the love of God has found us, all that we are will be done in self-giving love for others. To counter Victoria Osteen, Paul tells us that true worship is a response to God's love, and we live it out by loving others.

Paul begins with us loving each other, then he expands to us loving strangers and the saints, or other Christians who we do not even know, and then he moves out further to loving enemies and living peacefully with all. Like concentric circles that ripple out from the center who is God, love flows from God to us as we love each other, strangers, and enemies. Imagine the impact what one act of loving kindness can have on another.

Lots of you have accepted the ALS Ice Bucket water challenge to promote awareness about this deadly disease. If you have not seen it, many are posting videos online of themselves being drenched with a bucket of ice water and/or sending money to support research for ALS. The each person challenges 3 other people. It has a ripple effect. Just as human beings can succumb to hate, we can also be inspired to be a part of something bigger than ourselves, something that brings our lives purpose, and grows hope in others more than hate. Jesus took a bucket of water bent down and took the form of a servant at the Last Supper he shared with his friends on this earth. He took a towel and washed the disciples' feet to show them what love looked like. It looks like self-giving love. Love means serving.

When Jesus talks of enduring great suffering, we are very aware of so much suffering going on now. Not across the globe where violence and disease seem out of control, but here in our backyard. Last Sunday Eric Bost lost his dad to this dreaded disease ALS after years of suffering. Last Sunday a Clemson freshman and a baptized member of Mt. Pleasant Presbyterian, Virginia Gilliam, died senselessly from an infection. And one of our own Ron Trenholm died of cancer surrounded by his loving wife, Joanne, and family. Others I know and love are struggling with addiction, mental health issues, anger, and grief. We need to be reminded to "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." That is why we weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. God knows so many need to be loved. We can follow Jesus by denying ourselves and sharing God's love especially with those hard to love, like enemies. Paul's words remind us HOW to love.

In a minute we will sing a wonderful new hymn (by new I mean 1977 new.) Our friends sang this at our wedding. They sang the *Servant Song* because we were making a covenant before God and all these witnesses to live out the good news of God's love that had found us and brought us together. Some of the words are, "Won't you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?"

Whether in a covenant of Marriage, a covenant at a youth retreat, or because you are a baptized and beloved child of the covenant, love is how we worship God day by day, a full-bodied, whole-hearted love that seeks to serve in the name of Jesus Christ.

That is very different than what Victoria proclaimed,

"Do good for yourself. Do good because God wants you to be happy. Worship God not for God, but for yourself." Like Bill Cosby said, "That's the dumbest thing I have ever heard."

In contrast Paul writes about doing good as a way to live out the love of God poured out for us in Jesus who showed us how to serve. We love because God first loved us. That the good news. It's the best thing the world has ever heard. And the ripples go on and on...

¹ Rochelle A. Stackhouse, in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. by Bartlett and Taylor, (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2011) p. 14.