



Plymouth Congregational Church
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FROM PLYMOUTH'S PULPIT

“Lost and found”
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Scripture: Matthew: 16:21-28
Romans: 12:9-21
Exodus: 3:1-15

We live in an individualistic society here in the US. Individual success is always held before us as the ultimate goal. Common understanding suggests that our value is to be measured by our wealth and power, the location and size of our house and grounds, the number of toys we have – airplanes, motorcycles, atvs, boats, recreational properties— these become marks of status in our world. I am so aware that I can criticize this scheme, but we live in this world and because we are human we tend to buy into the value system to an extent that we probably should be embarrassed. No one wants to be powerless, poor, without toys, homeless, etc. We know that in that state, society in general and even our friends in particular may judge us harshly if we lack the valued items.

There seems to be an underlying assumption operating in our society and particularly within the political sphere, heard frequently in the middle class or higher, that the poor are poor by their own choice or fault – that we are all in control of our individual destinies. The argument goes that providing for people in poverty gives them an excuse not to

work or takes away any incentive to work. And on the other hand success is a result of our individual efforts and goodness. In this mindset, our riches mean that we are blessed by a God who puts a divine stamp of approval on our lives. These ideas are ripe for some critical analysis, which I believe would prove them so wrong. But, when we look at the consequences of this mindset, we should be quivering a bit. Because to the extent that we participate in these beliefs, we stray from the principles set out by Jesus. To succeed, we develop a keen sense of what will help us get the things of the world that we need to support our okayness, with ourselves and with others, always looking for how a thing will serve **our** purposes – rather than God’s. And, as John Denver used to sing “when things are what you’re lookin’ for there’s never quite enough.” And so we constantly strive to obtain more, better, until our extra barns are full and bursting at the seams.

Without a specific intention to do otherwise, we tend to grow in greed and self-absorption until we become the quintessential narcissists that our world seems to bless with accolades and deference. These are the people that we tout as the ones who “know how to get things done” and great business people. They can wheel and deal – often fixing for themselves an advantage over those for whose benefit they are entrusted to work. Claiming that their way will eventually lead to raising others up, their lack of concern for those living on the margins – either on the edge or within the pit of poverty is discernable to those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

But we do not want to see and hear – to do so would mean to face really tough choices that we would rather not think about. The central choice it would force would be whether to go along with the world, making no fuss about injustice or wrong thinking or to follow Jesus, thereby relegated to pushing upstream against a powerful current that threatens to sweep us out to a sea of chaos and regret. Remember the psych experiments back in the 1970s in

which a group of 3 confederates and one test subject are asked which line is longer than the other. When line “A” was clearly longer than line “B”, the confederates were asked to say the opposite. When the test subject was presented with the question after hearing the group’s response, a high percentage would go along with the group’s thinking, when it was obviously wrong. We are a people that want to “go along to get along.” And we really don’t want to see why not. We have to too large an extent given up critical thinking. We permit ourselves instead to believe **what** we hear from those who know how to say what we secretly want to be true. We want to believe that the rich and the deft inherit the earth – not the meek. But by failing to engage in critically examining the morality of our behavior, we have contributed to bringing our earth to a turning point that may not be reversible. As the polar cap melts, the water temperature rises, water absorbs more heat from the sun, and more ice melts, etc. At this point we are not unlike the man who when falling from a 100 story building was asked at floor 50 how he felt – his response is “so far so good.” We want to ignore and deny the effect our life style has on the planet and on the vulnerable people and creatures that live here.

But then we listen to a reading like this morning’s gospel in which Jesus confronts the human desire to reject God’s plan when it involves great sacrifice. I have to tell you that I feel for Peter in this story. Not 10 verses earlier, Jesus is asking the disciples “Who do people say I am?” and “Who do you (the disciples) say I am?” It was Peter who sees the truth in that moment and confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. For this confession Jesus lauds his faith, grants him the keys to the kingdom, gives him great authority over what will happen in the church which will be formed later – Peter is riding high.

But then Jesus is attempting to prepare his disciples for his coming persecution, torture, and death and to let them know that will not be the end, for in 3 days, he will rise again. But Peter – always impetuous and fiercely devoted to

Jesus cannot believe that this should happen. Peter loved Jesus and did not want him to be harmed. But that was not all that was behind his denial. After all, if God is on your side, you win wars, you get lifted to high places of power and wealth, and you live a life of plenty and ease. The Messiah was thought to be the one to vindicate the Jews and trounce their enemies in the political/military sense. And, of course, the disciples looked to share the good life with Jesus once he came to power. So, there is no wonder that Peter could not stand the idea of Jesus' death and could not help himself from "rebuking" Jesus on this issue. By doing so of course, he has negated his understanding concerning what the gospel is all about and what God's purpose and plan is aiming for.

And then what happens? Peter, who had ridden on the high of the keys of the kingdom is chastised by Jesus who says "get behind me Satan" reminiscent of Jesus' temptation in the desert after his baptism. The Satan that offered Jesus easy outs and great power – Jesus chose to decline and follow God's plan for his life. Can you imagine receiving a slur like that from a person to whom you are devoted? It would be a knife to the heart of one who saw himself as top disciple and lover of Jesus to be called the tempter, the prosecutor, the deflector from God's mission for Jesus. It must have stung terribly.

But that is not the end of the passage. Would that it were. We could pass it off as Peter's impetuosity and limit the error to him who did not understand. But then, not only does Jesus chastise him for wanting to thwart the predictable, eventual outcome of Jesus telling the truth to power, but he says that in seeking to find his life a man will lose it, but a man choosing to lose his life for Christ's sake will thereby gain it as a free gift from God.

I confess that this is a grave challenge for me as I expect it may be for you.

What does it mean to lose one's life for Christ? In the early church of course the threat was real and physical.

Many of the early Christians did lose their earthly lives for the sake of the gospel of Jesus. They were thrown to the lions, or otherwise dispatched. We tend to think of these people as long ago and far away and who did not have attractive lives to begin with. But that is not so. One saint, Perpetua, was a noble woman, a nursing mother, and a catechumen. She was arrested with 4 others, including her pregnant slave Felicitas. The detailed account of her passion speaks of her father's angry attempts to get her to recant her faith in Jesus. Before execution, she had one last opportunity to recant. Had she done so, she would then have been freed by the emperor. The emperor really did not want to have her killed. But she held fast and was executed. Her faith was so precious to her that no earthly life could compare. Hard to imagine. Would have been very understandable had she chosen differently. But her willingness to go to her death for her faith caused others to say what is it about Jesus that people are willing to die for their faith in him?

In our present age, we are not as likely to face physical death for clinging to our faith, although there are certainly places in the world in which this happens. However, in our relative safety, we cannot ignore that to consistently oppose those who would take advantage of the least, the last, the marginalized people of our society is to swim up stream. It does not play into either political agenda. In my view, neither the Republicans nor Democrats really have it right, because neither focuses on the core moral issue of our time – our greed and lust for power and wealth. Failure to face and address that issue as individuals AND as a society may well result in the death of our planet, not just our population.

How can we lose our life for Christ's sake? We must set aside our own preconceived notions and personal agendas, prepare our hearts to receive the saving grace of Jesus' love and forgiveness, and listen in the stillness for how we are called to participate in the building of God's kingdom here on earth. It means that we must stop looking for our

own advantage, and seek to do justice for those that are oppressed. It means that the church must look not to just its own physical survival, but rather to ways in which it may expand its ministry to a hurting world. The church and its individual members should be always cognizant about the probable effects that their actions will have on those who have little or no voice or ability to protect themselves. We must take steps to reduce our impact on the earth. We must look out for the vulnerable, the weak, the aged, the infirm – whether that infirmity is physical, emotional, or spiritual. Paul sums it up well in his advice to the church at Rome:

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 . . ." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Our souls could profit from our reading that section of scripture every day, with hearts open to what the Spirit is saying – calling for us to do and instructing us on how to be. If we

examine our lives against this advice, each line carries with it extensive ramifications for us.

It means that we must be willing to step outside of the comfortable lives we have built. Like Moses, who would be facing the possibility of murder charges when God sent him back to Egypt, we must be willing to answer God's call to action, even it means facing danger in order to accomplish God's purposes.

Simply put, we must be willing to set aside our own temporal agenda and advantage in order to secure an advantage for the aims of the gospel. My brothers and sisters, choose to lose **your** life for Christ. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. With God, all things are possible.