

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 31, 2014
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Psalm 26
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:21-27

Our epistle lesson this morning has the Apostle Paul speaking to the church at Rome, saying: “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.” (Rom. 12:2)

Alternatively, Jesus says it this way: “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me. If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life.” (Mt. 16:24-25)

I’ve thought a lot this week about Paul’s words and the words of Jesus. They are wonderful and powerful words. They are easily quotable words. But it strikes me that they are also, in some ways, *generalizations*. When Paul says, “don’t copy the customs and behavior of this world,” that is a great admonition. But what does that look like dressed up in work clothes *for us*?

And when Jesus says: “If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it,” what does that look like in terms of the specific habits and practices of our lives? These are forceful and powerful words. But still I was left wondering:

How does the culture I live in try to tempt me to keep my life my own? How does the world I inhabit try to soften the force of Jesus' words here? What forces are at work such that it is easy for me to quote these words of Paul and Jesus, but much harder to live them?

In short: What is it about my world that poses a significant challenge to my being a committed follower of Jesus?

I realize that both Paul and Jesus may have spoken in somewhat general terms for a reason. Cultures change, and times change. The church in every age finds itself confronted with new challenges brought about by changes in society and culture. There is a sense in which the church of every age must take these general statements of Paul and Jesus and attempt to interpret and apply them in the nations, cities, and towns where we live. Our recessional hymn last week had a great verse that spoke about this, when it said: “the church of Christ in every age, beset by change but Spirit led, must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.”

Paul calls on Christians to be cultural “non-conformists.” Jesus calls on us to give our lives away, to die a death of sorts. But what might that look like in 2014 in Boise, Idaho?

I thought about what it might look like for me this week, and came to several conclusions. I will share one of them this morning. Feel free to listen in.

I decided that to be a follower of Jesus means I need to release my obsession with pain free living.

The culture in which I live is obsessed with pain avoidance. We pursue happiness and comfort at all cost, and we have come to *equate* happiness with comfort and ease. Happiness has become a synonym for the absence of pain. But the truth is that as much as I would like my life to be free of pain, *happiness and the absence of pain cannot be my supreme goal if I am to be a committed follower of Jesus.*

The New Testament seems to be clear that God's chief desire for me is not my *happiness*, but my *holiness*. God's plan for me is not the fulfillment of my every desire, but to renew me in God's image and to make me like His Son.

Any delusion I may have that the goal of my life is my happiness and comfort is shattered when I hear these words: "From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that he had to go to Jerusalem..."

As a wealthy North American Christian, I confess that my understanding of what it means to deny myself and shoulder my cross and lose my life for Christ's sake is limited. I suspect that Christians in China, Iraq, Syria, and other places could speak of this with far more credibility than I can. I suspect that Saeed Abidini could preach this text with far more authority than I can.

But I know this much. When I hear my culture screaming at me that happiness equals a life absent of pain, and that my happiness is the supreme goal or end of life, I know enough to answer back: *That's a lie!*

John Wesley wrestled with this issue, and with these words of Jesus and Paul. In his *Covenant Renewal* service that he designed for his Methodist societies, there is a soul-searching prayer. It reads like this:

*I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
Put me to doing, put me to suffering;
Let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
Exalted for you, or brought low for you;
Let me be full,
Let me be empty,
Let me have all things,
Let me have nothing.
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
To your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
You are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.*

I wish for all of you this morning a life of supreme blessing and happiness. But do not accept the culture's lie that happiness is a life free from pain. Do not swallow the culture's sweetly packaged message that happiness is the supreme end of life. Do not be hoodwinked by the culture's obsession with self-preservation at all cost.

Remember instead the words of the One whose love for you is so total and complete that his call on your life is all-consuming. His love for you is so deep, so

profound, that he cannot accept the “leftovers” of your life. He calls you to be “all in.” He wants your life to be shaped by him, not by the values of a culture that is destroying itself. Isaac Watts was right: “love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all.”

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, in the bread and the cup you will see and hear Christ’s call on your life, perhaps in a new and fresh way. And in these elements of bread and wine you will also receive grace to respond to that call. So come with faith. Then offer yourself back to him as living sacrifices. Do not bring your spiritual “leftovers” – but bring your *whole* life to him.

From a cultural point of view this is insane. But in view of God’s mercy to us, it is the only *reasonable* thing to do.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.