

Westminster Sermon – The Heart of Matters  
Scripture Readings: Genesis 17:1-7,15-16, Mark 8:31-38  
Sunday, February 25, 2018  
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16. Priestly writer who offers his interpretation of human history as a series of covenants, each progressively narrower until the Covenant at Sinai between Yahweh and the people of Israel under the leadership of Moses. In this seventeenth chapter of Genesis, our author introduces the covenant God made with Abraham and Sarah and is explicit about Abraham becoming the “father of nations.” Muslims as well as Jews legitimately claim Abraham as their father. Hear now, the Holy Word of God.

*When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty;<sup>[a]</sup> walk before me, and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” <sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, <sup>4</sup> “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be Abram,<sup>[b]</sup> but your name shall be Abraham;<sup>[c]</sup> for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring<sup>[d]</sup> after you.*

*<sup>5</sup> God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Mark 8:31-38. We find ourselves at a crucial turning point in Christ’s ministry. Peter has confessed his faith at Caesarea Philippi in the preceding verses. And now Christ begins to teach the painful reality of the suffering ahead on his road to the cross and the sacrifices that are a part of each of our faith journeys. Words which are difficult to swallow even for those who, like Peter, have solid faith in God’s promises and covenant. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

*Then Christ began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,<sup>[a]</sup> will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words<sup>[b]</sup> in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” Amen.*

The title of the sermon: The Heart of Matters

*The text: "For what does it profit you, to gain the whole world and forfeit your life?" Mark 8:3b*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, Thank you for coming to us in this One we call Christ and for honoring us with the truth; for thinking us worthy of honesty with questions that get right to the heart of what matters. And now, may the words of my mouth and the mediations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen

A poignant question...one which wastes no time getting right to the heart of what matters in this life...and one which at the same time communicates the heart of the message Christ brought. A message which sometimes feels as foreign to us as it did that day to Peter.

It feels foreign to us, because there is a part of us, like Peter, that doesn't want to hear the truth when its painful—In as much as people don't want to hear the truth...many modern day leaders have stopped telling the truth...in matters of church and state. For some of us the truth feels foreign because we honestly have never heard it.

We aren't asked the difficult questions today and little that matters is told to us plainly.

This week we lost the plain-speaking and truth-telling American Icon, the Reverend Billy Graham, at the age of 99 who was as old as Abraham was when he was asked to walk with God. The Reverend Graham walked humbly and preached to as many as 215 million in a lifetime of service and dedication. He challenged people to walk with Christ and he was honest about the heart of the matters in this walk. This week when Trajan, Dale and I shared communion and lunch with members at Concordia, Dale read this poignant advice preached by Billy many years ago:

*Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. I will more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God.*

Reverend Graham, although not perfect by his own admission, sought to share the truth about Christ and who Christ calls us to be in our walk with God.

During my doctor of ministry studies I took a class on Christology at Eden Theological Seminary. Christology is the study seeking the truth about the person of Christ, who is at the heart of our faith. Theologians are concerned today as they have been concerned throughout the history of Christianity with the inaccurate message which is being communicated about who Christ is.

Although there are many things we cannot know about Jesus of Nazareth...people have in the past and continue today to portray him compatible with cultural and societal whims. People tell the message but not the whole message because it won't be pleasing to those who hear it.

Perhaps the greatest criticism of Christianity is directed at the simplistic understanding that all a Christian has to do is accept Christ in his heart...that Jesus suffered on our behalf so we no longer have to. At the heart of this criticism is the implication that one need not take responsibility for one's life because Christ has taken responsibility and that life with Christ is easy.

Therefore, many of us confess Christ as Messiah with Peter at Caesarea Philippi but we do not come down from the mountain into the valley to the difficult words which follow. By not completing our journey and walking the walk, we deny ourselves the opportunity to mature in our faith and to live our potential as God's people. As we consider our individual lives we all know Peter's struggle as our own. Often those who love us the most, perhaps too much, collude with us to play safe when we are confronted by difficult choices in life.

Nineteenth century poet laureate of the United Kingdom, Alfred Tennyson reflected on a tale of King Arthur's court in his poem "Gareth and Lynette." He tells the story of the youngest son of Lot and Bellicent who wishes to become one of Arthur's knights. His mother does not want to let him go and produces excellent reasons why he should stay at home. Gareth answers:

*"O mother, how can ye keep me tethered to you – shame!  
Man am I grown, a man's work must I do. Follow the deer?  
Follow the Christ, the king, live pure, speak true, right wrong,  
follow the king—else, wherefore born?"*

Christ asks Peter, as he asks you and me, not to play it safe in this life. And I suppose it's the honesty with which Jesus speaks that is the most refreshing.

Christ never offered an easy way. He didn't come to make life easy but to make humanity great. He sought to challenge us, to waken the sleeping chivalry in our souls. He speaks plainly about the cross he must bear, and then he challenges us

*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

To take up a cross does not mean we passively accept circumstances in our lives which cause pain. In Jesus day to take up a cross was to be regarded as a criminal and to die—to risk rejection from the status quo because of what we believe. Christ never asked us to do anything he was not willing to do himself and when he asks us to take up a cross...it is for his sake. For the sake of love and God's covenant we are called to make sacrifices in life.

Put another way by the Reverend Dr. William Barkley, Twentieth century Scottish pastor and author:

*God gave us life to spend and not to keep. If we live carefully, always thinking first of our own profit, ease, comfort, security, or our sole aim is to make life as long and as trouble free as possible, if we will make no effort except for ourselves and our personal success, we are losing life all the time. But if we spend life for others, if we forget health and time and wealth and comfort in our desire to do something for the God of our covenant and for the people Christ died for, we are living life greatly.*

For Jesus Christ, people are more important than things—they are worth living for and dying for...this is the heart of what matters. As we consider our individual lives and the ministry within our congregation, may we take these words to heart, spoken in love---grateful for the truth in Christ's honesty! *Amen.*