

## WHAT DISCIPLES CAN EXPECT, AND HOW THEY OUGHT TO ACT

Psalm 119:33-38

Matthew 16:24-26

Sermon presented by The Rev. Dr. Richard D. Raum, at Old First Presbyterian Church, Huntington, New York, on February 4, 2007

In this passage from Matthew 16 Jesus tells the disciples what they can expect, and how they ought to act. He teaches three things. First: his followers must, “deny themselves.” Perhaps he glances over at Peter, who would deny him, three times. Jesus’ counsel applies to all of them, however, for at the end “all forsook him and fled,” it is written. Second: his followers must, “take up their cross.” Loyalty to Jesus is difficult. On Good Friday none of the disciples could be found to help him carry the cross. It would be carried by a stranger. So, deny yourself, take up the cross, and finally: “follow me.” Follow me to crucifixion and the grave. Follow me to resurrection and glory. Jesus wanted them to know what lie ahead, so they can be prepared for it. Now they know. That’s verse 24.

But that’s not all that’s going-on here, in this passage. Jesus proceeds to speak a further word of truth -- to disciples there and then, but to us, as well, to any who may hear or read these verses. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” -- verse 25. Allegiance to Jesus Christ may expose one to the hostility of the world, and under occasional extreme circumstances may even entail the risk of losing one’s life as he lost his. But the supreme paradox of faith is this: that only by losing oneself completely in service to Christ does one find true life, a life of purpose and power.

Next Jesus said this: “For what will it profit a person to gain the whole world but forfeit one’s life?” (verse 26)

Tony Dungy, coach of the Indianapolis Colts, one of the teams in today’s Super Bowl game, recently answered an interviewer’s question about his purpose in life this way; he said:

My favorite verse in the Bible is Matthew 16:26, where Christ says: “What will it profit a person to gain the whole world but forfeit one’s life?” If players come and play for me, win a lot of games, make a ton of money, but they don’t leave as better people, I haven’t done my total job. Winning is what we get paid for, but I think my job is more than that . . . If people didn’t know me, what I’d want them to know [about me] is that everything I do, I do for the Glory of the Lord. That’s who I am. I wasn’t always that way . . . I [still] have negative thoughts, negative actions . . . I have the same issues that everybody else has. What I’ve tried to do is use my faith in my job and let my faith direct me.

Tony Dungy goes quickly to the very heart of this, his favorite verse. The world has so many goods and pleasures to offer. There’s prosperity, possessions, success, fame, the esteem of others, extravagances of many kinds. To summarily dismiss any or all of these things would be

foolish. The world is what it is. Dungy said it well: one way or another, winning is what we all get paid for. But it's not the totality of what we are put here for, nor even the larger part. Accumulating all the goods and pleasures of the earth cannot secure eternal life. And if a person forfeits the things of eternity in mad pursuit of the things of this world, then there's no gain at all, only loss.

Ralph J. Doudera, CEO of Spectrum Financial Services, recalls a day when his life seemed to crash into a wall. He was 40, and fabulously successful, so successful that he could retire then, at 40. And retirement was probably the best thing, because he was no longer enjoying his work, the fun and the passion had gone out of it. He came to see that, without realizing what was happening – (and this is always the way it is, isn't it [?], when we become the very thing we despise, it doesn't happen all at once, but day-by-day) -- Doudera realized he'd become one of those "unhappy rich people" with whom he'd been working for years, and whom he pitied. He wondered: how did this happen?

One day he happened to pull his high school yearbook from the shelf. He writes:

Under my name is listed my aspiration – to be a highly paid engineer. Not a great engineer, mind you, nor a notable one, but "show me the money," [a highly-paid one]. My Mom [he recalled] was so disappointed when she read my comments that she asked me: "Why didn't you say . . . 'to do God's will?'" "That's not what I want," I told her shortly. I love money.

In college Doudera decided his financial aspirations were unlikely to be achieved as an engineer. Instead, he writes:

I tried investing in stocks, bonds, commodities, gold, diamonds, oil drilling partnerships, numismatic coins and multilevel marketing. Solomon, one of the wealthiest and wisest men who ever lived said, "whoever loves money never has money enough." That was me, a lover of money.

Until that day, at age 40, when none of it seemed to make sense or to matter, anymore. "What will it profit a person to gain the whole world, but forfeit one's life?" "I needed help," he writes. "I dug out my Bible . . . to get some new direction . . . I was serving money. It ruled me . . . Jesus had found me out."

How Doudera's life got turned-around is the stuff of his book, *Wealth Conundrum: A Money Manager Wrestles with the Puzzles of Wealth*. But I love what he says toward the end. "OK, Mom, I understand now," he writes. It took half-a-lifetime to learn for himself what's written so plain in scripture that any child can understand it. But, now, Mom I finally get it. "To do God's will" is the most important purpose of all.

There's a country church in Little Sandy, Texas, East Texas, Brown Chapel Methodist Church. Most churches struggle these days, but for a church like Brown Chapel, remote, never large, and with a lower-income African-American congregation, the times have been especially

difficult. But in recent years extra money has come from a native son, who has done well, and not forgetting where he came from, and where his faith in Christ was taught and transmitted, sends money. Recently the congregation moved from its dilapidated old wood building, into a modest but sturdy new church, brick with white trim, financed, as well, with the help of their benefactor, a son of the church who now lives in Chicago – Lovie Smith, coach of the Chicago Bears, who will be coaching today against Tony Dungy’s Colts. Lovie Smith recalls going to services at Brown Chapel as a child -- Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening, too, in the old-fashioned Methodist way. He recalls being encouraged there in athletic pursuits. He also recalls, more important by far than football, being taught the truth of scripture: that no matter how much one gains in this world, the world gives nothing it cannot also take away, and all is counted as loss compared to the immeasurable riches of God’s grace in Christ Jesus.

Will you not trust Christ’s certain promise of eternal love, rather than your own love of mere earthly things that satisfy for the moment but cannot endure? “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me,” says Jesus, and you will find joy and passion, purpose and direction, and rest for your soul.