

Sermon Text: Matthew 16:21-28

Before I begin my sermon, I did want to say that we have had wonderful attendance at Wednesday nights. I was a little bit worried. Never in my life, never in my ministry of almost a quarter century, have we opposed a Bible study, Gospel of John, with shag lessons on the other end of the campus, but it turned out that both were tremendously attended and participated in, and I expect that again on Wednesday night. Please come even if you have not come before. There is a wonderful time to be had, and you can jump right into the Gospel of John. I am also very pleased with the attendance we've had at our pick up three-on-three or four-on-four basketball tournament as the case may be. We've had good attendance there, and we'll do it one more night. We hope something regular may grow out of that.

There's one more thing that I hesitate to say before I begin my sermon proper, but I want to say that I do love Main Street, and I am not coming from on high when I say this, and I am not trying to manipulate from the pulpit when I say this, I am just trying to let you know that we have plenty of money pledged to make our payments for the building. It's just a matter if we have the money that is pledged come in on time when the payments are due. I want you to seriously consider that. I, myself, my wife and I have decided that we are going to give, as C.S. Lewis said, “When you ever decide what to give, the answer is give a little bit more than you can comfortably afford,” and we have done that today, and I encourage others to do that as well, and so we'll have no problems with the cash flow in making our payment for the building. We love that building, and we love Rhett Baker's bank and his business over there, but we do not want a drive through put into one of our classrooms so we want to keep it completely useful for us, and it is becoming more useful. He may not appreciate that. Where is Rhett?

Now, for my sermon. I remember back, and this will date me and also paint me as a small town boy, when I was young boy in Woodruff, we had a picture show. Now in Spartanburg, they had theaters, but the one in Woodruff was the picture show, and the only difference I could figure was in Spartanburg, they had new movies, and in Woodruff at the picture show, they had old movies. We went downtown. It was about three blocks from my house, and I remember, eight and nine years old, we'd walk down there, and it probably cost about a quarter. I don't remember. They always showed these old movies. A lot of time, they showed black and white movies, and very often, they were Westerns, and I could memorize the Western plot. Same plot over and over. There were the good guys, and there were the bad guys. You could tell by their hats. The good guys wore white hats, and the bad guys wore black hats. There was always a saloon with swinging doors, and every swinging door, at some point, had somebody thrown through it, and that's when the action started, and that's when the hero stepped up. The hero always had a sidekick, who was funny, who stepped up with him. There was always a beleaguered sheriff, who did not want to be a sheriff. There was a damsel in distress, who tried not to fall in love, but she did anyway. There was a gunfight, and the good guys always won. The dialogue of these movies always had a formula. It had a formula. At some point, the hero, especially if it was someone like John Wayne, he would stand up straight, and he would stare down his lessers, and he would say, “Now, listen up and listen good, I'm going to tell you what to do.” That's when you knew he was taking over. He was taking charge, and it was all going to be okay when he said, “Now, listen up and listen good. I'm going to tell you what to do.” The camera would show all his cohorts, his guys, and they would have their listening faces on, you know, they're listening because they knew

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he was about to say something that would shape the rest of the story. I say that just to say this, the Bible has similar formulas, but we don't catch it. You can recognize these formulas.

In our Gospel story, you remember, you just heard, it says, “And Jesus said to his disciples.” When it says Jesus said to his disciples, you're supposed to listen up because well, aren't WE his disciples? You need to elbow the person next to you, and say, “You better listen, some important teaching is coming our way.” When it says, “And Jesus said to his disciples,” this is for us, too. It is not debatable. It is not a topic for discussion. Jesus didn't conduct focus groups. This is a pronouncement. So you want to be among Jesus' disciples, then here is something that will shape the rest of your life. And Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” Now, in Jim's translation, I read the implied verse, “You think you can follow me, and just keep on doing whatever you feel like? No! You follow me, you must follow me, and you quit following your daily changing desires and waffling selfish goals. You follow me.” “ For whoever wants to save his life, will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me, will find it.” I'll translate. Whoever wants to keep their life to themselves, for themselves, by themselves is alone now, and will stay alone forever, but whoever gives their life to God in Christ will find eternal life that begins in that moment, and will continue with God forever. Listen up! He's telling us what to do. Jesus is telling us what to do or at least where we end up depending on what we do and whom we give our life to. Alone with self-intact, rejecting God, or with God now, who connects us to others and to God forever. Alone, cut off from God, or together with God and others. Stark choice, but a very clear one.

Now Peter wanted what Peter wanted. He seemed to figure that he could be with God in Christ and continue on with his dreams of earthly power, make no mistake; he had dreams of earthly power hooked up to Jesus. He wanted to stand right next to the Messiah when he came into his kingship, Jesus King of the World, and right hand man, Peter. That's what he envisioned. Peter wanted God and worldly wealth and worldly power and worldly prestige, and what Jesus was saying was he was going to die, and Peter said, “No way! That is not what I signed up for. That is not what I left my wife and family for. You cannot die! I am still waiting for the payoff.” Now, some people say Peter wasn't married, but at one point in Scripture, Peter's mother-in-law was healed, so I don't know of any other way to get a mother-in-law than to be married. So he must have left his wife and family.

The most difficult situations I have ever seen in churches come from people who had, like Peter, a dream of what the church could do for them, and no concept of why we exist from God's point of view. To make disciples, to reach out and to bring in the hurt and the lost and the lonely and the outcast, and train them up to go out and bring in more. That's the great commission. That's our job description. The most difficult, hair-pulling situations I have ever seen in churches were from people who used the church as a place of power instead of a place of humble service. Peter, right here wants Jesus to stay Peter's course, to be Peter's kind of Messiah. He is telling God what to do, telling God how to be the Messiah, and to meet Peter's desires at the same time. No, you're not going to a cross. That's not going to happen. That's not the plan I have, Jesus.

When I was in Hardeeville, my very, very first church, that town had published in the paper one week “45% Illiteracy Rate,” and the people complained. They said this is horrible. We can't get industry to come here. We can't get jobs, back in that day, this was about 25 years ago, with 45%

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illiteracy rate. So, Caroline and I, we thought, the church can meet this community need. We got the Laubach reading method and training. We lined up some state funding. We opened the doors. We put out signs, “We’re going to offer adult literacy tutoring here at the Hardeeville United Methodist Church.” I was unbelievably blindsided! I had one woman yelling at me, “My grandmother did not build this church to let black people in here!” I didn’t see that coming, and various other yelling and screaming and hymnal throwing! My goodness! Yes. They put the word out onto the street that no matter what the sign said, certain people were not really welcome, and so those people did not come. Of course, it doesn’t matter one whit what grandmother thought she was doing or how she thought it should be done. That would be telling God what to do. When we presume to tell God instead of listen to God, we’re wrong. We’re just wrong. Preachers, I suppose, and it can be done this way, can get along fine catering to one generation or another in any given church, but it occurs to me that when that generation grows up and moves out or moves on or when that generation dies, what becomes of that church? It dies, too.

A long-range plan for church growth has always been ours. It’s right there in Scripture. Go and make disciples. Train up your children to be disciples, and give them the charge to bring in more to train up and send out until kingdom come. Now, back to Hardeeville. It really did not occur to me that some people would have their personal desires so wrapped up in their definition of church that they would be completely blind to mission and purpose. By the way, one of the few people who actually came to sign up for that training was the mother of my worship chair, whose husband had recently died and left her handling all the family business and bills for the first time, and she could not handle them because she was, in fact, this was a family secret, she was, in fact, unable to read. The program did not happen because some iron-willed members were in the church to have their will done, forget what Jesus wanted. Iron will, that often sounds, when we say iron will, like a compliment, but not in Jesus’ teaching, it is not. If our wills are ironclad and self-centered and made up and you better not get in my way, well, then, Jesus says, “Listen up! You want a good life? Then give it over to God and humble yourself.” Don’t be an ironclad will, but be clay. Be clay available for shaping from the Master’s hand. The unchanging God wants to change you, and change me, and make us a bit more useful in kingdom building. Now, if you want a miserable life, then always do what you want, and justify yourself all you say and do, submit to no one, not ever, not even God, and that is alone, and that is miserable. You’ll find this formula in the Bible. When God is telling us something really important, he says it three times over, back to back. Now, listen. See if you think this is for you and me. Number One – If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. Number Two – For whoever wants to save his life, will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me, will find it. Then the third time, what good will it be for a man if he gains the entire world, but forfeits his soul. You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen these verses cross-stitched and hanging on anybody’s wall! Never! They are demanding. They are confrontational. They are clear. There is a stark choice implied. Just before these three pronouncements of following and denying self and trusting God instead of what the world can give, comes that famous section where Jesus calls Peter Satan, and we wonder what that is about. Why on earth would Jesus call Peter Satan? Well, I’m going to tell you. Peter loved Jesus, but Peter also had these strong selfish reasons for not wanting Jesus to go to the cross, and Jesus, of course, knew that, and so he says to Peter’s outburst against the cross, “Get behind me, Satan!” Now, the Greek word for behind may be a contraction of the words, which mean to follow, and just like we might say, “Are you behind me on this?” Are you behind me on this? Or will you back me up? Or, as the kids say, do you have my back? You see, Peter was getting out

front. Peter was out in front, and he was telling Jesus what to do. He had his plan. He had his will. He was no longer following God. God's plan included the cross. How often we follow until God takes some turn where we don't want to go. I could write a book! I think all of us could about places and situations that God has placed us in, none of which, we would ever have chosen. So far, in my life, God has found a way to use this faithful servant, even sometimes when I was very, very reluctant. So God used Peter even though Peter was very, very reluctant, and so he can with you. Very often, we tell God what to do, such as when we pray for new disciples to come in our door, and then we pray certain ones who come in our door might move and find a church where they'll be more comfortable. Yes, we do. In our English translations, it's important to know that Satan is capitalized, but that is not true in Greek. This is not a proper name. It simply means what it means. It means the word tempter. If you read it the way it is written, it says, "Get behind me, Peter, you tempter, you." You're thinking in an earthly way not in God's way. There is already a plan in progress. It involves a cross and salvation, not your will, and you do not get a vote here. Get behind if you wish to follow God. The world has a different message. Our world seems to be infatuated and preoccupied with self and what we want. Covenants in our culture no longer seem to matter. Marriage does not seem matter. Integrity and promises and the well-being of children seem to be entirely secondary. We care very little about the well-being of our neighbors, and definitely not of strangers far, far away. Mostly, we care about our changing, our changing daily desires. How contrary to the example in the life-giving principles of Christ. He came to give life. He revealed and demonstrated the principles of life. He clearly taught that life is not to be found in living for self, but rather giving of self to God, who sends us out to others. We could cynically just wink an eye when Jesus speaks of denying self, or we could close both eyes prayerfully, and remember Jesus' words in the garden, "Father, not my will, but yours." Submitting to God, being reshaped by God, and living out to others, instead of only to self, that is the cure for what ails us. What ails us is sin. Sin is the inability to get outside of the self. Saint Augustine called it in Latin, "incurvatus se." That means a life that is curved in upon itself to the exclusion of others. In face of this, Jesus says that the only way you can be saved or healed is to forget the self and to lose the self with a capital S. It is amazing how consistent this theme of submitting to God's will is pounded point after point in these short, powerful verses. More amazing is how we fail to hear it as marching orders for those of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus. Now, I'll admit that this is one of those good news/bad news situations or bad news/good news situations. First, there is submission to God's plan, but the plan is for the healing of our souls. There is full forgiveness and full acceptance and full redemption and celebration and unexpected joy for all humankind, which flows from the humility and the submission of Jesus on the cross. After that, a resurrection. The bad news of submission and sin, but all the rest of this is good news.

I want to share with you one of my favorite good news/bad news jokes. When I get into the very, very deep and pointed sermonizing, I always like to lighten with a joke, but I have to tell Main Street first because it's been only just a little over a year, and you're not quite sure when I mean something to be funny. This is funny. I promise. One of my favorite good news/bad news jokes, I like this one. It's about the commander of a prison camp in World War II, and he addresses the prisoners who have worn the same clothes for weeks. You can imagine how filthy, how stinky the clothes were! The commander says he has some good news and some bad news. The good news is you all get to change your clothes today. The bad news is that prisoner #3 will change clothes with prisoner #9, and prisoner #5 will change clothes with prisoner #12, and so on. Jesus came to

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save us. That word also means heal. The bad news – we need saving! The good news – God’s kingdom is coming! God’s will will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. The bad news – we do not now live that way. We will have to submit and allow God to change us. The good news is that God has given the Holy Spirit to enable us to change and to live God’s will. The bad news – we must give our broken hearts to God with faith and trust to reshape them, to mold them into something whole and something holy.

The famous theologian, Karl Bart, was once asked if Jesus could forgive even Judas, and the professor shook his head, and said, “You just don’t get it! That’s the wrong question. Judas betrayed Jesus once while we betray Jesus over and over again. The good news isn’t that Jesus could have forgiven Judas. The good news is that Jesus can forgive you and me.” Now, a fellow preacher used that same illustration from Karl Bart once, right before communion one Sunday morning, and he said half the congregation practically ran to the altar because they heard that Jesus could forgive them, and he said that the other half sat back in the pews, crossed their arms, and refused to come to communion because they heard they were worse sinners than Judas. Good news! Bad news! It is both in the Gospel. It is all there. Remember those selfish dreams of Peter, how on the mount of the transfiguration he wanted to build a booth on that mountaintop before going down into Jerusalem. He said, “Jesus, let’s stay here awhile. Don’t go down into Jerusalem.” He was tempting Jesus here, you must never go to the cross. Tempting Jesus to wander from God’s plan. If we look around in our lives, there are so many temptations, so many sparkly things, be careful what road you choose. All but one leads away from God. God has made us a way, and he has marked it with a cross. I want you to hear these words from Psalm 49. I rarely use the Psalms to close a sermon, but this is strangely appropriate. “Man cannot abide in his pomp. He is like the beast that perishes. This is the fate of those who have foolish confidence, the end of those who are pleased with their own portion, like sheep they are appointed for Sheol. Death shall be their shepherd. Straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away, Sheol shall be their home. Verse 15, “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol; for he will receive me.” Trust in God rather than trust in the portion of the whatever, no matter how pleasant you have it in life. The Gospel is not another self-help plan. It is a gift for you and me. To grow into and to share a gift that God empowers you to take on and to take in when you submit your heart and your will and your soul to him. He changes us, and makes us useful in kingdom building, and Jesus said to his disciples, listen, this is for you and me, and Jesus said to his disciples, “He who would save his life, will lose it, and whosoever loses his life for my sake and for the Gospels, will find it.” I hope you have heard the message for yourself today. I hope you will respond in prayer in this moment. Let us pray.

Holy Father, Living Lord, and Guiding Spirit, so often your words seem dry and dusty and old and to someone long dead and beyond our reaching. Let your words reach us today. Let us understand that we were meant to be in relationship with you, that we were meant to offer ourselves up, not iron-willed, but soft clay to be reshaped by you, to be remade by you, to become new men and women, boys and girls, echoing the love, the forgiveness, the hope, the compassion of Christ. Make it so, and remove whatever obstacles that keep us from being so. In Jesus name, Amen.