

“More Than Chocolate: Giving up Will”

When we visited the Holy Land, it seemed like every day we went somewhere named Caesarea. This is because so many places were built to honor Caesar Augustus. At Caesarea Maritime, we saw the remains of the palace built on the Mediterranean where Caesar spent his summers. This included the room where Paul was interrogated before he was sent to Rome for his last trial and possible death. Today’s story takes place in Caesarea Philippi, made into the capital by Philip – son of Herold the Great and hence the name. As you can see, the Caesars had big egos!

Mark says that Jesus and his disciples are travelling in the villages around Caesarea Philippi which means that they were almost half-way between, Galilee and Jerusalem. Jesus’ ministry in Galilee is finished and they are turning toward Jerusalem. Of course, at this point Jesus knows he is headed toward the cross. So he and his disciples are both physically and symbolically between two places where they cannot only look forward and but also look back.

Having been in the region, I think it is significant to note that the disciples would also have been surrounded by so many physical reminders of other gods in this place. The temple built to honor Caesar, representing the government. Idols built to honor Zeus, the Greek god of all gods and the king of sky and thunder as well as one built to honor Pan, the god of shepherds and nature.

It is in the midst of these surroundings and based on where they have been and where they are headed, that Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” He receives a variety of answers. Then he asks a more important question. “Who do YOU say that I am?”

He asks them this question because who *Jesus* is and what *he* does are intimately related to who his *disciples* are and what will be required of them. Peter answers immediately, in true Peter fashion, “YOU ARE THE MESSIAH!”

The truth is that this was a really bold answer for Peter. During the 400 years in between the prophet Malachi’s promise that a Messiah was coming and the preaching of John the Baptist, some very definite ideas had developed among the Jews as to what the Messiah would look like. The common belief was that a time of terrible tribulation would prevail on earth. Then, when things were as bad as they could get, Elijah would enter history again as a forerunner to the Christ and the Messiah would appear.

Once he arrived, all the nations would come together and there would be total destruction of the powers in the world that were hostile to the children of Yahweh. Jerusalem would be renovated and the Jews that had been dispersed all over the land would be gathered back to Palestine, which would be the center of the world. And from then on, peace and goodness would reign forever.

This is a radically different picture from the world that the Jews of Jesus’ day were living in. Governed by Rome and living daily with oppression, they begin to hear that the Son of God has finally come! But instead of being a warrior who would prevail against the enemy, he is an ordinary man who travels with twelve questionable characters and eats with sinners, talks to women in the streets and heals on the Sabbath. It is no wonder so few people recognized Jesus for who he was.

Nevertheless, after Peter confirms his Lordship, Jesus then tells them where they are headed. Towards Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die and rise again and where they will be asked to take up his cross and follow him. And in keeping with our Lenten Sermon Series,

“More Than Chocolate”, I think Jesus is telling all disciples in every time and place that when we pledge to take up the cross and follow him, we will be giving up our will. In other words, when we make the claim that Peter did and say that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior, then we will be following HIS will and not our own.

Now I don't know exactly what it meant for someone in first Century Palestine to deny themselves, but for 21st century American Christians, it is a pretty radical step! In our Western way of thinking, the predominant idea is that everyone has a “right” to do what they want. We often think that we can pursue happiness at all costs. We hear the mantra, “If it feels good, do it!” We tell our children and grandchildren they can be anything they want when they grow up. I agree with the importance of building a positive self-image in our children and ourselves, but I can't help but wonder if we haven't taken the whole concept a bit too far.

You see, what Jesus is saying is that to be his follower means that we must say NO to the self that wants to seek comfort, status and personal gain. We must make plans, use our gifts and work towards building up the kingdom of God and God's will rather than seeking our desires. And this is hard for many modern-day Americans because we live in a FedEx, drive-through, Instagram world where we get what we want, when we want it, according to our *own* will.

As I wrote this, I remembered the time when our daughter Katie was 6 and declared one day that she was going to become a vegetarian. Her resolved lasted until the next day when we went to McDonald's and I asked if she wanted a salad. When she said, “No – I want a Happy Meal” I reminded her of new healthy endeavors and she quickly decided that she had denied herself of cheeseburgers for long enough.

Now to her credit, the first part of giving up our will – TO DENY OURSELVES – is tough for anyone. So it helps me to remember that Jesus never calls us to do ANYTHING that

he himself has not already done. The story is told of a famous Roman general who was discussing with his staff how to take a difficult position. Someone suggested a certain course of action and remarked, "It will only cost the lives of a few". The general immediately responded by asking, "Are YOU willing to be one of the few?" Jesus was not the kind of leader who sat remotely and played with the lives of his followers like expendable pawns. What he demanded THEY should face, he too, was ready to face. This strengthens our belief that Jesus has the right to call us to give up our will and deny ourselves because he has already done so and will do it with us.

The same is true in the next part of Jesus' command to Peter which also calls us to give up our will. "TAKE UP YOUR CROSS", Jesus says. Jesus knows the burden and pain, the sheer weight of the cross he struggled to carry up the hill of Calvary. While we are in Jerusalem, we walked what is known as the Via Dolorosa, of the "Way of Suffering" – the path from the courtroom where Jesus was convicted to the hill where he was crucified.

Three places along the way, there are signs to note that Jesus stumbled in that spot. One sign marks the place where a man named Simon of Cyrene was asked to help Jesus with his task. It reminded me that, while none of us knows what it means to physically carry that cross, there are ways that we can carry the cross when we understand the burden that someone else is carrying and choose to minister to them.

If you have lost a child, you KNOW the pain that no one else can truly understand and can share your heart with that person who must bury a son. If you have lost your health, you can empathize with the one who may only see hopelessness and assure them that God will give them the strength to find a way of coping with new circumstances. If you have been abused, or punished for speaking the truth, or lost a spouse or faced ANY hardship then you can carry the

cross for someone else who is shouldering the same burden by simply being an empathetic listener or by supporting them with your prayers and friendship.

And I believe that when we give up our will by denying ourselves and picking up the cross, then and ONLY then will we be able to follow Jesus' third part of his command to Peter. This is the same invitation that he made to the fishermen who left their employment to join his band of disciples. It is the invitation that he made throughout his whole ministry and makes even today. FOLLOW ME. But this call has been redefined for us because today, we see that invitation with the cross in mind and understand that to follow Jesus will ultimately lead only to glory.

The last line of our Scripture this morning could easily be regarded as a proverb of Jesus because he said it so often. One might even say that it is a summary of what Jesus calls us to do when we give up our will. But William Barclay's interpretation on this line gives it an even more positive spin. He says that Jesus means that certain things are lost when saved and other things are saved by being lost. What a twist! When we give up our will, we are actually gaining rather than losing because we are living within the will of God.

Isn't that a wonderful message and a perfect way to think about denying ourselves, picking up the cross and following Jesus? Let's explore it a little deeper. What THINGS has God given you? The ability to teach, to sing, to knit. A beautiful smile or an infectious laugh. The gift of knowing when to be silent. The gift of being able to encourage or perhaps of simply being present. Then consider this - are you losing these things because you are saving them? Or are you saving them because they are being used?

In a way, that is what Paul offers us in his letter to the Ephesians. He reminds us that when we give up our will, when we put on the new life in Christ, we don't so much give up

something as we do receive something more. When we clothe our will with the new self, created in the likeness of God and according to GOD's WILL and righteousness, we are sharing the gift of salvation by the sharing the gifts that God brings to our lives in Jesus Christ.

And just this morning, we were all privileged to witness this call to give up our will in one of the most beautiful and meaningful sacraments of our faith. Baptism. Today, when Katie and Benjamin decided to bring their son to the baptismal font, they were pledging to help Robert give up his will and seek God's will for the rest of his life. And we all did the same. When we answered "we do" to the question posed to us to help guide Robert in the ways of the Lord, we were promising to show him what our new lives in Christ are clothed with.

And as those who are called to put on the new clothing of Christ by being baptized into his life, death and resurrection, we are also called to ask ourselves today and every day if we are willing to follow the commandment that Jesus gave Peter. And in giving up our will, we are acknowledging the hope that we have when we say to him, "You are the Christ in my life and so I want to follow YOUR will". This is a hope that will enable us by God's grace and love to deny ourselves, follow him and stand at the foot of the cross which is now planted on the hill of our salvation. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.