

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury  
Sermon – August 28, 2005  
“Crazy Little Thing Called Love”

Matthew 16: 21-28, Romans 12: 9-21  
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost/A  
Lynne M. Dolan

William Douglas, a Supreme Court Justice once said: “as nightfall does not come at once, neither does oppression. In both instances there is a twilight when everything remains seemingly unchanged. And it is in such twilight that we all must be most aware of change in the air—however slight lest we become unwitting victims of the darkness.” Douglas was talking about a moment of transition—a space in time when everything hangs in the balance. At such a moment the future breaks in. Business consultant William Bridges calls this transition time the “neutral zone,” because it can be a time when people get caught between one way of perceiving reality and another.

Matthew tells us that an important transition took place following the encounter we heard about last week where Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Right after Jesus praises Peter for his remarkable revelation he tells the disciples to keep this information to themselves.

Today’s lesson picks up the rest of the story with the phrase “from that time on” (16:21). These words mark a new phase in the journey. The last time Matthew used those words was at the very beginning of his public ministry, immediately following Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. (4:17)

So what is this transition? First we see right there is a challenge. There is the challenge from Jesus, then the challenge from Peter. Finally, Jesus speaks in paradoxical language about what it means to follow him.

After Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus needs to tell the disciples what the future holds for him and for them. Naturally, they do not understand what he is telling them. It only sounds like nonsense to them. Pick up your cross, lose your life to find it. After all, they are just getting used to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. Many of them believed the Messiah would come with pomp, power and prestige. Only a few of the prophets had dared to suggest that the Messiah might suffer and die. Few dared to think that the Messiah would champion the poor and break bread with sinners. No wonder Peter says to Jesus, “God forbid it Lord. This must never happen to you.” (v. 22) Jesus knows what he has to do and no one must stand in his way, least of all Peter. So he tells

Peter in no uncertain terms to step aside, to get with the program, to get on the way with him or get left behind.

It is so easy for us to understand how Peter feels. Who among us would not protest if a trusted friend and leader told us they were willingly preparing for their own death? Who would not protest if we were told the only way to be faithful to God's mission was to submit to death on the cross. Even if they don't yet understand, Jesus insists that the disciples get behind him. Jesus knows this is what has to happen and he is at peace with his decisions. Now, they must have faith. The disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying because nothing like this had ever happened before. They were scared and confused and we say and do strange things in that state of mind.

Jesus tells Peter to get behind him. In order to do that, Peter will have to let go of some things. He will have to accept the kind of Messiah Jesus promises to be and leave behind his image of a powerful, CEO type of messiah. Peter would have to leave behind the false dreams of glory he might have had. Peter will have an important role in building his church, but first he must get behind Jesus. He has to do it Jesus' way. He has to accept what Jesus tells him and trust that as painful as it seems, it is the only way to change the world.

Undoubtedly, this was not a comfortable place to be. We like our power. We are accustomed to being in control. We don't like it when someone tells us to step to the back of the line, to get in step with the program. However, we know well enough that not trusting in the program gets us into trouble far too often. We need to go where Jesus is going, live as he lives, do as he does. That is not an easy journey. There is an awful lot we will have to leave behind in order to get behind Jesus.

What Jesus says to his disciples makes little sense to them. Jesus says, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." We know little about cross bearing. However, Jesus says there is no way around it. We can not envision what glory is all about unless we first embrace the cross. We can't have our lives unless we are willing to lose them. That is a hard message to follow. "Say it isn't so, Jesus!" Jesus says our only hope is to get in line behind him, to do as he has done, to take up our cross and follow. That line takes us into some frightening territory. Jesus teaches us that saving grace is encountered not through control, but through vulnerability, that submitting to the cross is not a sign of weakness but of a power few can truly understand.

If taking up our cross is the mark of discipleship, then what is our cross? The preacher Brad Binau suggests our cross might be our own most difficult problem. Our cross, like

Jesus' cross, is the thing that we are most tempted to avoid—the thing that scares us the most. It is the thing that scares us so much that we are tempted to believe that peace is best found by avoiding it. It is that thing that seduces us toward control and away from vulnerability.” No matter how much we want to avoid it, we must face the cross. We must journey with Jesus all the way from the Upper Room to Calvary. There is no short cut to grace. Binau reminds us that ‘it is [at the cross that] God reveals that grace is most profoundly encountered by facing our fears, not avoiding them. ‘Wouldn't it be great,’ says pastoral theologian Bill Arnold, ‘if we protected ourselves through knowing what we face [rather] than avoiding what we fear.’”<sup>1</sup>

Binau goes on to admit that the paradox we must embrace, is that our cross, our own most difficult problem, is not a barrier to grace, but is in fact a doorway to grace.” This is a hard lesson to learn. Because, facing our cross, means facing change. In the program of Alcoholics Anonymous there is a saying, “if nothing changes, nothing changes.” For recovery to begin, something must change. For salvation to take hold, something must change. Jesus tells his disciples what to expect in order to prepare them for the changes that lie ahead. They can't take up their crosses acting the same old way. They can't follow him thinking as the world thinks.

What is your cross? Do you have an issue, an attitude, a belief, a doubt that keeps you from getting behind Jesus? These are not questions we like to ask ourselves. It is easy to think you have no cross to bear and then wonder why you feel stuck or angry. One's cross could be: the relationship with your parents, a bad habit we have cultivated, a good habit we resist cultivating, cynicism, the inability to take a joke, the insistence of making everything into a joke, an addiction, the inability to be intimate, the lack of boundaries that invites too much intimacy, authority, our passive/aggressiveness, shame, abuse, and I am sure you might be able to name a few more. When we look at it this way, I imagine there is at least something on that list that captures your attention. I know there were several that gave me reason to pause.

Whatever your cross, Jesus invites you to figure it out and to take it up. That is where Jesus is waiting to find us, in the midst of our most challenging moments. There is no easy path to salvation. We think we can ignore the tough stuff, the denial part, the servant part, the cross part, and still consider ourselves a Christian. Unfortunately, it's not that easy. Jesus invites us to take stock of our lives, to be honest with ourselves, to face the tough stuff, the thing that keeps getting in our way and then to do what we need to do to change. Jesus invites us to take up our cross and to follow him. He expects us to give up our lives in order to find true life.

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<sup>1</sup> William V. Arnold, *Pastoral Responses to Sexual Issues* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993,) p.14.

We are in what some might call a twilight zone, not the old 1960's television program we might remember, but that moment when things are about to change. Darkness is creeping in around us and unless we take notice and seek God's wisdom and guidance, we risk "becoming unwitting victims of darkness," as William Douglas put it. Light will always overcome the darkness if we live the kind of life Paul describes in his letter to the Romans. If we love genuinely, hate evil, are patient in suffering, bless those who persecute us, rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep the darkness will never prevail. Paul tells us to leave vengeance to God and instead live peaceably with all. Then he instructs us to take care of our enemies, if they are hungry feed them, if they are thirsty, give them something to drink for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their head. In that culture, offering food and drink to someone in need, even one's enemy, were gestures of hospitality. Giving someone hot coals to heat their home or cook their food, a much-desired commodity, would have been an extravagant gesture of hospitality. In other words, treat your enemies no differently than you would treat your most beloved friend.

Friends, no one said it would be easy. We are in our own twilight zone, caught between what was and what is yet to be. Remember, "If nothing changes, nothing changes." It is easy to be stuck, to not recognize the very thing that keeps us from moving forward, to get scared, to want to hold off the future. Jesus will have none of that. He says, "get behind me Satan," Harsh words for one who only wants to protect one whom he loves. Our resistance can not change what Jesus knows to be the truth. The way of the cross is ultimately the way of life. Jesus knows big changes are in store for us. Take up your cross, he says, leave your old life behind and follow me. May it be so. Amen