

“The Paths Where He Leads Us”

Luke 9:23-25, 28-37

February 7, 2016

Transfiguration Sunday

Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Luke 9:23-25, 28-37

Then he said to them all, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?’

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’—not knowing what he said.

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

I have a question for you. If you have kids at home, and they ask you, “What do you hope my life will be when I grow up?” - what would you answer? If

you have kids you care about – your own kids, or kids whose baptism-promises we make month after month, the kids we lead in Scouts or tutor at Reading Power or teach at Sunday school – if you have kids you love, and they ask you, “what do you hope for me?” - what would you answer? I suspect that many of us would simply say: “I want you to be happy. I just want you to be happy.” And that is a worthy and faithful answer, for in Scripture, “happy” is also translated “blessed.” We want our children to be happy. We want our children to be blessed.

But *then* comes the next question, the harder question: “So what do you think will make me happy?” And I bet that question would give us pause. What *does* make us happy? And while we’re taking our time to think about it, our culture jumps right in with tons of quick answers. What will make you happy?

- Be rich.
- Be beautiful.
- Be powerful.
- Be popular.
- Be brilliant.
- Be famous.
- And today with the Super Bowl, of course, be a star athlete.

But God has given us a different answer – an answer that in our heart of hearts, we really do trust, or we wouldn’t be here ... and we certainly bring our children here. Today we’re here because our God has told us that the key to happiness – the key to blessedness - is simply this: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Which is not far off from the Scout oath we heard [at

the 9 o'clock service] this morning: serve God and country, and help people at all times.

What do we hope for our kids when they grow up? We hope our kids – all the kids we care about – will be happy. And we know that, in the end, their happiness will not be measured by their net worth, or the title on their business card, or the shape of their figure, or the number of likes they get on Facebook. We know that real happiness –happiness that can withstand the rollercoasters of this life – is grounded in the security of love, love of God and love of neighbor.

But, of course, our kids don't just listen to our words, do they? They pay more attention to our actions, to the way we live our lives. They're interested in authenticity, they care about integrity. So how *are* we living our lives, and does what we say match what we do?

- Are we chasing the Almighty dollar? And if we find ourselves less flush than we once were, do we think less of ourselves?
- Are we caught up in how we look, worried about extra layers of fat around our aging bellies, ready to get “work done” because we're afraid we'll be less beautiful than we once were?
- Are we hurling ourselves at climbing the ladder at work at the expense of our family? Are our volunteer activities turning into competition to get our picture into *Forest & Bluff*?
- Are we reliving our days as star academics or star athletes, glued to our identity as head of the debate team or captain of the football team? Are we overly invested in our kids' performance, as if it reflects on our own worth and value?

If it's any comfort, I'm not casting stones as much as confessing my sins. It's hard to keep your eye on the prize of loving God and loving neighbor when the pressure to up-build yourself is *everywhere*. Everywhere.

So how do we hang on to what we say we value? Today's Scripture lesson makes us a promise: if we keep looking to Jesus instead of looking to the world for our happiness, he will keep pointing the way. If we keep looking to Jesus, he will keep pointing the way.

Let's go back for a moment to the verses we read. Jesus asks his disciples: Where is the profit if you gain the whole world, but lose yourself in the process? Where is the profit in wealth or beauty or fame or power if getting them means forfeiting yourself? But anyone who is willing to set down your life for my way will save it. And then – immediately – Jesus takes his disciples up the mountain to witness his glory. To show them what's the endpoint for them if they follow him. To hear the voice of God reassuring them: “This is my Son, my Beloved; listen to him.”

How do we know which way leads to life? By following Jesus – who promises to keep showing us the way. By following Jesus – who keeps pointing us in the right direction, if we'll just keep our eyes open.

Which takes me back to a mountaintop experience I had over a dozen years ago – literally, an experience my daughter and I had in the Swiss Alps. Annie and I were hosted by my dear friend Denise, a Swiss Reformed pastor I'd gotten to know at an international pastors' conference the year before in Geneva. Denise and her daughters came to visit us in the States; the next summer, we were invited to visit them. What a dear treat!

We started out in Zell, the “little willage” outside of Zurich where Denise served as pastor. We enjoyed touring her ancient church – with a chapel dating back to the 3rd century. Our girls had a great time playing together and gorging themselves on Swiss chocolates. But the best part was going hiking together in the mountains.

The first trip we took was up a small mountain near their home. We climbed deeper and deeper into the primordial woods. And then, to my surprise, a road sign appeared out of nowhere – a street sign marking a fork in the path. A sign, pointing the way.

I thought the road sign in the woods was funny, though Denise didn’t find it odd at all. Then, a few days later, we drove high up into the Swiss Alps, to Denise’s childhood cabin. It was something out of Heidi, or the Sound-of-Music. That very day we went for a hike in the glorious Alpine meadow, just below the edge of the glacial snow-cap. We were high above the trees, surrounded by crystal ponds that form the head-waters of some of the great rivers in Europe. We hiked up the path through the meadow – the sky bluer than I had ever seen before, mountains everywhere around us, pine trees like an endless carpet far below. And as we were taking in all this glory, we rounded the bend. And there, in the middle of nowhere, guess what? There was another *street sign*. Literally: a tall pole with directional signs – Bern, that way; Zurich, that way. And we all laughed.

I wonder: was it like that for Peter and James and John that day on the mountaintop? A moment of awe, and laughter, and glory? And perhaps a moment of relief as well? That there are signs on the mountaintop. Signs in the woods. Signs in the darkness. Signs in the light. This is Christ’s promise to us:

we can trust he will point us in the right direction. We can trust that, as long as we follow, we will not get lost on the way.

This week, the season of Lent begins, with Ash Wednesday services throughout the day. All of you are welcome, no matter what your tradition. We'll have Sunday and Wednesday services throughout Lent, as always, and we hope you'll be part of them. Our focus this year? It is the way of Jesus: where he leads us, where he points us, how we follow him. It is not rocket science; yet neither is it dull. For he leads us to glory, and to joy.

The poet W.H. Auden's says it better than I can:

He is the Way.

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness.

You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.

Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;

You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.

Love Him in the World of the Flesh;

And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.ⁱ

Isn't that what we want for our children? Isn't this what God wants for *us*? For us to be happy, and dance for joy? Isn't that why God sent Jesus, why God planted Jesus in the middle of our world, to point us to the Way? To point us away from the paths of meaningless accumulation, to point to the way that

leads to life? To point us away from the destination of wealth, away from the endpoint of beauty, away from the goal of popularity or fame?

Like a street sign on the mountain, like a road sign in the woods, he's there all along, pointing us to the way of real life, to our truest selves, that has nothing to do with the bright, shiny things of the world. And when we follow, he promises, he will take us to a glory that shines brighter still ... he will take us to a glory that can never be taken away ... he will take us to behold the permanence of love, to behold the joy and glory of God. Amen.

ⁱ W.H. Auden, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944)