

"GET LOST"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York
September 29, 1985

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INTRODUCTION

If you remember old movie westerns, they used to be written according to a formula. The villain was always recognizable in any movie. You could pick him out right away. The hero was also drawn to a formula. He had to be tall, lean, a man of few words, always spoke softly. There was always a time in the movie, according to this formula, when the hero would say something like this to the villain: "I'm going to say this once, and you listen real good". John Wayne especially used to say that. And you knew that what was going to be said next was going to shape the relationship between those two people. "Listen real good" was part of the formula.

Mark writes his Gospel with a formula, too. Our text for this morning, for instance, uses two phrases that have the same weight and meaning as "I'm going to say this once. You listen real good". And the first is the formula "And He said this plainly". What that meant was, this is not debatable. This is not up for group discussion. So when the text reads, "And He said this plainly", you know this is going to be important. And what He said plainly was that He was going to suffer, be rejected, crucified and resurrected. And Peter, as usual, didn't get it and tried to debate the matter.

DEVELOPMENT

Peter rebuked Jesus, thought Jesus was crazy saying things like that. And Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God but of men". Now that's a terribly harsh thing to say to anybody, especially to Peter, the first of the disciples. But Peter had been warned. Jesus said to him, I'm going to say this once. You listen real good. Peter didn't listen. Now that's one formula. There's a second.

And the other formula used in this passage reads like this, "He called to Him the multitude with His disciples, and said to them..." Whenever He called to Him the multitude, and the disciples, it's a plenary session. It's like the President addressing both houses of Congress. You know this is a major speech, this is important. So listen real good.

And what follows, then, in this speech, are three short teachings, all familiar, all similar, all you've heard before in the Gospels, and all recorded in the synoptic Gospels, and they're all disturbing. You know them.

"If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross. "Whoever would save his life will lose it. Whoever will lose his life for my sake and the Gospels will find it." "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?"

One, two, three. There they are. They're easier to take when they are listed in isolation, but group together, with no subordinate clauses, no qualifying phrases, not even conjunctions between them, they sound like commandments. One, two, three. They are undebatable. You see, this is a major speech he's giving, so listen real good. This is the way it is. And what these three teachings say is, if you want to find life you've got to lose yourself.

I used to think there were some people that I couldn't say that to. I couldn't tell them about those teachings of Jesus because they just couldn't take it. They'd hear it wrong. These are people who come to me, and to all other pastors and counselors, because they feel something has gone wrong in their lives. They don't know what it is. They seem to be doing everything right. In fact,

some of them are successful the way the world judges success. But they're not happy. They are gaining the world but forfeiting their life.

This is not an occasional visitor. I've seen this pattern over the years many times. We say of them, they have "bad images of themselves". They don't think they measure up. And you say, "Against which standard don't you measure up?" They say, "You name it". They don't know. They just don't feel like they are worthy. They don't like themselves, and they don't really believe that anybody else could like them, either, not if they knew. That's what they say.

And I used to think that I couldn't tell these people to lose themselves, because they're already doing that. They've spent a lifetime doing that. And they're miserable. They do dumb things continually to insure that the misery is going to hang around. You can't tell these people to bear a cross. They look for crosses, not because they're disciples of Christ, but because they think that's what they deserve in this life. They look for crosses to bear. There are just some teachings of Jesus that you can't tell them.

ANTI-RELIGIOUS PSYCHOLOGY

Have you ever noticed that there's a good bit of psychology that is anti-religious. It bothers me, too. From time to time I have bumped into psychological therapists who tend to be ignorant of authentic religion. There are some who think that religion, especially Christianity, and especially Protestant Christianity, is a neurosis. They believe that if they are going to cure the patient they are going to have to destroy the religion. And I know why they feel that way, and I'm tempted to say they're right, because the religion that they see in their patients isn't helping them; it's hurting them. It doesn't free them; it locks them in prisons of self-hate. It's bad religion. It's a religion of rewards and punishments. It's a religion that emphasizes what we have done, or what we haven't done. It's a religion of obligation, not of grace. It's exactly that kind of religion that Jesus condemned and from which He came to set us free. He came to set us free of bad religion.

There are a lot of people who think that that means freedom from law and morality, but that's not true. Moral religion is not bad religion, even if it makes you feel guilty. Some people ought to feel guilty. Guilt is bad only when it does no good. And it does no good when it doesn't lead you to seek forgiveness and a new life. There are two kinds of people who will never seek forgiveness - the self-righteous and the self-hating. Both persons use religion for their own neurotic needs. Religion isn't the problem with them. Their problem is they can't get outside of themselves. They have different symptoms, in fact, opposite symptoms, but they have the same disease. And the Bible says that disease is sin, and defines it as self-centeredness. And the cure for it is centering your life in God. If you want to find life, then you've got to lose yourself and trust God.

I learned something a long time ago about myself. I've got to remind myself that Christianity is supposed to be about good news; that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are called "gospels", and that "gospel" means "good news". Therefore, the story about Jesus, the story told in the four gospels, is supposed to be good news. And the good news is about God, not about me. It's about God and what God has done for us. "God so loved the world that He gave His Son not to condemn the world, but to save it". And anyone who can trust that good news will find eternal life. That's the Gospel. That's what Christianity is all about. That's what all the shouting was about two thousand years ago. It was

about God and what God has done, and trusting what He has done for our life.

I have to keep reminding myself of that, because I'm tempted to believe that my worth as an individual is determined by what I do. And since I don't do very well, I'm tempted to despair and get depressed on the one hand, or tempted to become defensive and self-righteous on the other hand. It's then that I need to remember that Christianity isn't about me, it's about God and what He has done for me. And if I can center on that and trust the Good News that He loves me as I am, and sent His son to show me that I am accepted even though I feel unacceptable, and that I am loved even though I don't like myself, then I gain courage to try again, and to stop doing the things that do no good, and to see my life as a gift rather than as an obligation, and enjoy it as it is, instead of lamenting that it is not something else, and stop worrying about how I'm doing all of the time and trust that I am not being graded on what I do. I have already received my grade. So even if I err or fall on my face or do those things I don't want to do, I am not a failure. That's the good news. I'm not a failure. I feel like a failure when all I can see is myself.

JESUS CAME TO SET US FREE

Jesus came to set us free, and I'll tell you from what He came to set us free. He came to set us free from self so that we can enjoy and serve and love the great, expansive world outside of us, the world that God created for us, the world that we either ignore or fear because we can't get outside of ourselves.

That's why Jesus called the multitude together, along with the disciples, and made this important speech, "If anyone would come after Me let him deny himself and take up his cross. Whoever would save his life will lose it. Whoever will lose his life for my sake will find it. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?"

I still can't tell some people that. They're not ready to hear that. They will misinterpret it, I know. They will hear it as some kind of sentence to suffering. They don't need to hear that. They need to hear and to trust the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Then they will see that their problem is not that they don't think enough of themselves. Their problem is that's all they can think about. You notice how many times in the Gospels Jesus says that this is for those with eyes to see? Those with eyes to see are those who know who he is and why he has come and what he has done for us. Those with eyes to see can see how simple these teachings are. It's the way it is. They may be paradoxical, but it's the way life is. You receive only when you give; you gain life only when you're willing to risk it; you love yourself most when you love others more. That's the way it is.

One of the things I like about Leo Buscaglia, that psychologist from USC, is that he emphasizes the paradox of giving in order to receive. In one of his books he tells of the advice that he gave a student who was unhappy with his life. He was miserable all the time, felt there was nothing worthwhile in his life. The student's name was Joel. One day Buscaglia said, "Joel, come here". And he took him to a convalescent home not far from the USC campus. Inside there were a lot of aged people lying around on beds in cotton gowns, just staring at the ceiling. They walked into the hospital and Joel said, "What am I doing here?" "I don't know anything about gerontology". And Buscaglia said, "Good. You see that old lady over there? Go over and say hello to her". "What's all?" Buscaglia said, "That's all. Just go say hello". So he went over

to the lady, said, "Hello". She looked at him suspiciously for a minute, then asked, "Are you a relative?" Joel said, "No". "Good! Sit down".

So he sat down and they started to talk. I'm going to quote Buscaglia now, because you've got to hear it in his own words. He said,

"Oh, my goodness, the things she told him. This woman knew so many wonderful things about love, about pain, about suffering, even about her approaching death, with which she had made peace. But no one cared to listen to her. Joel started going nnce a week, and pretty soon that day began to be known as 'Joel's day' And probably the greatest moment in my educational career" Buscaglia says, "Came one day when I walked on campus and there was Joel, like a Pied Piper, with about thirty old people following him to a football game in the Coliseum."

I tell you, you can see it everywhere. You can see it everywhere when the Gospel opens your eyes. It's the way things are. Life is found only by getting outside of yourself.

MARRIAGE

When I marry a couple I try to point out to them that what they are doing goes against the advice given by the culture as a whole in which we live, which is that if you're going to find happiness then you've got to think only of yourself. That's the advice of the culture. We live with it daily. We're bombarded by messages, especially through advertising, that say if you want to find yourself then think of yourself. But in marriage you take vows that say nothing about yourself. The vows of marriage are focused entirely on the other person. There is no contractual clause in the vows. It does not make love and care and fidelity to another person dependent on reciprocation. You vow to give yourself unqualifiedly to another human being. And that's a scary thing. You are risking your life. And the charge to the couple in the ritual reads like this:

"If you will keep these vows inviolate...then God will bless your marriage, grant you fulfillment in it, and establish your home in peace."

What that is saying is that blessings to you are byproducts of giving to others. If you try to get those blessings any other way, you'll loose them. If you give yourself, you'll find them.

Our culture doesn't support that. It says think of yourself. It says don't make commitments, especially to other people, especially life-long commitments. It says create your own space, and protect it.

Well, if you've got the eyes to see, that's a prescription for misery. Because our problem is not that we don't think enough of ourselves; our problem is that we can't get outside of ourselves. So what the Church says in the marriage ritual is simply an application of the Gospel, that "He who would save his life will lose it. He who will lose his life will find it."

During the Second World War there was a young woman who lost her husband, a

doctor, in India, from some tropical disease. The shock of it sent her into despair. She lost all interest in life, didn't care whether she lived or died. She booked passage on a ship back to America, and on that ship she met another survivor of another tragedy, a seven year old boy, whose missionary parents had been killed in the fighting in Burma. The little boy was attracted to the woman, I guess perhaps because a seven-year old boy needs a mother, especially under those circumstances. But she would have nothing to do with him. In fact, she scheduled her time on shipboard so as to avoid him. She couldn't get outside of herself and her sorrow long enough to comfort a little boy. She had her own problems to deal with, was the way she put it.

That ship was torpedoed one night, began to sink slowly. The woman came out on deck, prepared herself to go down with the ship. She thought that was the solution. But on the deck she saw the little boy, shivering with cold and fright. He saw her, came over to her, clung to her. And something came over her. She led him to one of the lifeboats. They both got in. And for the next several days, until they were rescued, she held him. And her friends, looking back on that incident, say they don't know whether the woman saved the boy, or the boy saved the woman.

"Jesus said to the multitudes and the disciples..." That's a formula. That means that what follows is going to be important. So listen real good. "He who would save his life will lose it. He who will lose his life (and get outside of himself and give to somebody else) will find it.

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"I have seen the future and it looks
very much like the present...only
longer"

Dan Quisenberry
Kansas City Royals

(Bit of a whit...sage...as well as a
good reliever as Doreen will tell you)