

“Living in Faith”

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First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 16:21-28

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 146:1-5

Author Leith Anderson tells about a very old man who gave a speech at the 100th anniversary of the arrival of missionaries in the Belgian Congo. He said that he soon would die and that he needed to tell something that no one else knew.

He explained that when the first white missionaries came to the Congo, his people didn't know whether to believe their message about Jesus' life, death and resurrection or not. So they devised a plan to slowly and secretly poison the missionaries and watch them die. One by one, children and adults became ill, died and were buried.

It was when his people saw how these missionaries died that they decided to believe the message of Christianity. Those missionaries stayed and died in the Congo because they trusted Jesus. And it was the way they died that taught others how to live.¹

As Christians, we are seldom if ever called to literally die for the faith. Most people live long and relatively happy lives. And yet the way we live our lives is supposed to reflect our faith, to teach others how to live.

Our hope as Christians is that others will see the way we live and come to know and love the Lord in a new and more meaningful way. Somewhere between birth and death, we have that opportunity, the opportunity to live for Jesus and not just for ourselves – actually, everywhere and all the time we have that opportunity! That's why Jesus says, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it?”

What are some ways that we could give up our way of life for Jesus, for the sake of the message he brings? Come on, this is Lent, the season of giving up things. *What could you give up for Lent?*

How about giving up sweets, TV, Facebook, or fast food? Now, do you think these are the types of thing Jesus is talking about?

¹ Leith Anderson, *Winning the Values War: Thirteen Distinct Values That Mark a Follower of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995), 198.

What do all these things have in common? They're all bad habits, or can be. Giving up a bad habit doesn't really reflect our faith, does it?

What else might Jesus be talking about when he says, "... **Those who want to save** their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it?" What do we encounter when our lives are at risk? How would you feel risking your life? What takes hold of us?

How about fear? We feel afraid, don't we? But actually, our fear of losing our lives is not really about dying. It's about losing little bits of ourselves along the way.

Jesus is telling us not to be afraid of this. That those who are afraid to give themselves over to his teachings, they gain nothing by avoiding the risk. But those who risk their life – their sense of self for his sake – find new life, they find a greater sense of self as reflected in Jesus.

Jesus is all around us, and the only thing blocking him from coming into view is our fear – our fear of loss, and not the losses we talked about a minute ago. If it's not giving up such things as sweets, TV, and Facebook that brings us closer to Jesus, what does? What fears do we have that get in the way of our reflecting Jesus to others? Let me give you an example, and then we'll see if we can think of some more.

How about the fear of being judged by others? Can't you think of a time in your life when you would have acted differently if you were not afraid of what others might think about you? Think about what Jesus could do if you stepped out in faith and let go of that fear.

Maybe it's something as simple as befriending the unpopular kid at school or spending time with the person no one else wants to be around.

Giving up "popularity" for Lent, that could be more rewarding than giving up sweets. OK, it's time again for congregation participation. What's another one? What's another fear that we have in life?

How about the fear of losing our position in society, of being seen as less than you are right now? Giving up self-importance, that could be more meaningful than giving up Facebook. What's another one?

The fear of disappointment, of not getting what you want. Giving up expectations, there's power in that.

How about the fear of someone else making decisions that effect your life – the fear of not being in control. Giving up the need for control.

How about the fear of being attacked by others, the fear that others will walk right over us if we don't stand up for ourselves? Giving up enemies for Lent, that could be more rewarding than giving up TV.

If we want to follow Jesus, then we have to give up the desire to be popular as judged by others, and instead be genuine; give up our sense of importance and instead be available to others; give up our expectations and disappointment and instead be thankful for what we have, what God provides; give up our need for control and instead trust in God; give up our fear of enemies, knowing that God has our backs, that through the cross God has overcome all that has or ever will stand in opposition to God's will.

As Jesus approached the cross, it was Peter who was gripped with fear, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" All Peter can see in the cross is loss – the loss of Jesus, and with that the loss of their position in society, the loss of their hopeful expectations, the loss of their control over the future, the loss that comes from being falsely judged by our enemies.

Peter was afraid, and Jesus called this fear "a stumbling-block." "You are a stumbling-block to me," says Jesus, "for you are setting your mind, not on divine things, but on human things." Jesus is giving us a choice. We can either live in fear, or we can **live in faith**. By living in faith, we need not fear – any loss.

As we enter into the season of Lent, I invite you to pray about and identify the stumbling-blocks in your life – the sense of self-importance that distances us from others, those expectations and disappointments that sap our energies, that need to control an uncertain future that defies our faith in God, and the fear that our enemies will triumph over us, at the expense of divine justice.

Whatever it is that is a stumbling-block between you and acting out your faith, set it aside. You can identify whatever it is by looking at the fears you have in life. Take one or two of those fears –those stumbling blocks- and write it down on a slip of paper later today. And then give it over to God.

Some people use a God box. They write down their fears and struggles and then put them in their God box, for God to take care of.

Or maybe take that piece of paper with your fear, or burden or challenge written on it, flip it over, and ask God what he would write on the other side.

Maybe there's someone in your life who can help you carry that burden; put that person's name on the other side.

Maybe there are resources you can imagine that can help you overcome your challenge; list them on the back.

Or if it's a loss you're struggling with, pray to God to show you what's waiting for you beyond your sense of loss – maybe peace, or thankfulness for what you had

and have, or perhaps a new blessing that doesn't take the place of the loss, but a blessing that comes to you in the midst of your loss. Write as a prayer for yourself on the other side of your loss.

Our God is the God of Jesus Christ. And it is in the cross that Jesus shows us how to get through all the struggles of this world. By following Jesus to the cross – and beyond – we can live our lives, not in fear, but in faith, a faith that sets us free and gives us access to true life, a life that reflects our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and merciful God, we thank you for the gifts of the season of Lent.

Thank you for the call to slow down, to quiet the voices that vie for our attention. Help us to be still and to enjoy the presence of your Spirit.

Thank you for the invitation to examine our hearts and lives, to take stock of our relationships, our loves and our fears.

Grant us courage to address the stumbling-blocks that pop up in our lives, getting in the way of our closeness to you.

We want to be close to you, Lord, and have nothing stand in our way. We pray for those who are experiencing the pain of loss, and especially for the family of Jim Minor, that you would in time bring them to a place of peace.

We pray for those recovering from illnesses and surgeries, that the way would be clear for regained health and restored mobility – most recently for Jerry Havenhill and Dick Falk.

And we are thankful for the good progress of Dora Dunnaway and Claudia Grunewald, and ask your continued blessing upon them and all who are in our hearts and minds in this moment.

Lord God, we thank you for showing us the way to new life and celebration, the way of Jesus Christ, the way of the cross.

Help us to remember his ways, just as we remember his words, when he taught us to pray saying together,

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**