



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"The Heart of the Gospel"
Sermon Series: "Our Upside-Down Kingdom"

Matthew 16:13-27

By: Dr. Carol Friesen

at 8:15 Chapel & 11:00 sanctuary worship services

February 27, 2011

Matthew 16:13-27

(New International Version 1984, ©1984)

Peter's Confession of Christ

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, ^[a] the Son of the living God."

¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, ^[b] and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades ^[c] will not overcome it. ^[d] ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be ^[e] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be ^[f] loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Jesus Predicts His Death

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life ^[g] will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.

Footnotes:

- a. [Matthew 16:16](#) Or *Messiah*; also in verse 20
- b. [Matthew 16:18](#) *Peter* means *rock*.
- c. [Matthew 16:18](#) Or *hell*
- d. [Matthew 16:18](#) Or *not prove stronger than it*
- e. [Matthew 16:19](#) Or *have been*
- f. [Matthew 16:19](#) Or *have been*
- g. [Matthew 16:25](#) The Greek word means either *life* or *soul*; also in verse 26.



Introduction



Have you ever heard of an upside down house? Well apparently they're out there... This one built in Northern Germany is 23ft-tall and described by the carpenters who built it as one of the craziest things they've ever been asked to do. The fully furnished "house" has a kitchen, a bathroom, a living room and a sleeping room. They went to great length to make sure every detail was perfect, even using needle and thread in

order to keep the bed linen in place. Apparently putting the bathroom together was the trickiest part of. And there are more upside down houses out there. Here's another one in al so in Germany. And one in



Poland a popular tourist attraction as a warning to people about spoiling the planet.

These upside down houses challenge our perspectives and the people who visit them not surprisingly report that the experience can leave them feeling dizzy and disoriented.



all.

built

While our text today might not elicit such a visceral response as the upside down houses these verses do remind us that the Kingdom of God often does appear upside down. One minute Peter is confessing Jesus as the Christ and being declared the very rock upon which the church will be built...and the next Peter is being rebuked for having the mind of man... And what does Jesus mean when he says that those who lose their lives for him will find them...and how could it be that the Messiah, the one upon whom they had placed all their hopes would suffer and die.

Upside down thinking doesn't make sense. And even when you and I have heard these words of Jesus before – they challenge our perspective. Today I want us to consider these verses – in light of our Sermon Series on Acts – to see how the Way of the Spirit might reflects this same UPSIDE DOWN theme.

But first let us PRAY

(1. The Way of the Spirit is UPSIDE DOWN; God calls the most unlikely (the weak and the foolish) to accomplish His purposes.)

Doug Congdon, our high school director, will be preaching this text at the 9:30 service. Its taken from the theme UPSIDE DOWN of WHPC's Student FOCUS Weekend that has just concluded and while these verses represent an interlude in our study of the Book of Acts, they also remind us of how UPSIDE DOWN the kingdom of God and the Way of the Spirit both are.

In our sermon series, we have seen how the church was birthed at Pentecost and how it continued to grow as the Good News was preached first in Jerusalem, then in

Judea and Samaria and eventually even to men like Cornelius. Saul, the strict Pharisee bent on persecuting Christians had his world turned "upside down" on encountering the Risen Christ and last week our text



revealed how Jewish believers had their understanding turned upside down when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles.

*“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man,
but by my Father in heaven.
And I tell you that you are **Peter**,
and on this **rock**
I will build my church...”
Matthew 16:17,18*

Looking back at these verses in Matthew we are reminded of Jesus’ prophetic words regarding this same man Peter. He said that Peter would play a pivotal role in working out God’s purposes in and through the church. With a play on words, he called Peter the rock - Just as Peter has made a declaration about Jesus calling him the Christ, Jesus turns around and makes a declaration about Peter.

Peter, the rock? This fisherman who wanted to put up 3 shelters – for Jesus , Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration, Peter who jumped out of the boat to go to Jesus and began to sink when he saw the wind, Peter who vowed never to deny Jesus and then denied him 3 times, Peter who cut off the ear of the priest’s servant only to have Jesus reattach it. Peter who in this very text is one moment declared blessed and the next an agent of Satan? Boisterous and impetuous Peter - a rock? Let’s be honest, he seems a surprising choice. And yet as we have been watching the story unfold in our sermon series on Acts, we’ve seen Peter become an impassioned preacher, performing miracles, refusing to deny Christ before the Sanhedrin, being flogged and jailed and taking the Gospel even to the home of the Gentile Cornelius. Peter the fisherman became Peter the Disciple, then Peter the confessor of Christ and eventually, Peter the Rock, building the church.



Two weeks ago, Peter Barnes told the story of Ruby Bridges a 6 year old girl who in 1960 courageously exercised her right to attend the officially de-segregated William Frantz School in New Orleans. Federal marshals accompanied Ruby to and from school to protect her from the angry crowds gathered in protest. Peter shared how each day Ruby paused for a few moments to pray for those angry crowds. She was the only child to attend that elementary school for much of that year as all the white children were kept away by their parents. Ruby did what was right and she was willing to put her life on the line to break down barriers, the fruit of which we experience today.

God used this 6 year old child to accomplish His purposes.

While the way of the world is to leverage wealth, status and power that is not the way of the Spirit. (*See below 1 Corinthians text*) Instead God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.



*“But God chose the **foolish** things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the **weak** things of the world to shame the strong.” (1 Cor. 1:27 NIV)*

*“Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these **"nobodies"** to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies.”*
(1 Cor. 1:27 The Message)

Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in the message “Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these **"nobodies"** to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies.”

Who in His right mind would choose someone like Peter to be head of the church or 6 year old Ruby to lead the struggle for desegregation – or for that choose a path of suffering and death...and yet The scriptures are full of the most unlikely candidates – men and women chosen not because of their brains or brawn or business acumen, but because they were willing – willing to hear God’s call and to follow Him. The way of the Spirit is upside down – upside down because God calls the most unlikely – the foolish and the weak – the nobodies of the world - to accomplish His Kingdom purposes.

There’s a second way in which the Way of the Spirit is upside down.

(2. The Way of the Spirit is UPSIDE DOWN; God calls us to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow Him.)

Jesus said to his disciples “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24) Self-denial, choosing the way of the cross and following are NOT popular themes – not back in 1st century Palestine and not today in America. The world in which I have been raised - the world that has profoundly shaped me - has encouraged me to gratify my desires - “to get it now” – whatever the it might be - “that “the sky is the limit,” and that “I deserve a break today...” Even my Evangelical education has taught me to handle self denial cautiously lest the practice of any form of abstinence confuse my understanding of salvation as a free gift of God and lead me down the slippery slope of works righteousness. And yet clearly Jesus has something to say to us about self denial and cross bearing.

It’s interesting to imagine the kind of family life that Peter might have had. We know that he was married – after all Jesus healed his mother-in-law – and yet he obviously spent a lot of time on the road while Jesus was alive – and afterwards. What kind of sacrifices did his family face as a result? How did they survive financially – after all he left his fishing nets to follow Jesus.

There is no mention of Paul having a wife or kids but we do know that he wrote to the Corinthians acknowledging the benefits of being single. Married people – even then - got caught up in trying to please their spouses - so they just weren’t as available - their interests became divided (1 Corinthians 7). But I don’t think I’ve ever heard someone preach or teach on the calling and benefits of singleness. I think it’s too UPSIDE DOWN...too much about sacrifice - it just doesn’t fit our world...Married or not, Peter and Paul chose to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Jesus. Did they do it perfectly? No – I don’t think so. I’m sure there were times they were weary and frustrated and even unsure of themselves. But they persevered to the end...It seems that Peter suffered martyrdom in Rome as an old man - crucified head down during the reign of Nero and that Paul suffered the same fate but beheaded.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the brilliant theologian and author of *The Cost of Discipleship* believed that “suffering was the badge of true discipleship” - that every Christian was called to carry a cross – but that the cross was there, right from the beginning; there was no need to go out and look for a cross, no need to run after suffering. Bonhoeffer wrote, “Every command of Jesus is a call to die, with all our affections and lusts. But we do not want to die and therefore Jesus Christ and his call are necessarily our death as well as our life. The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life...”

This past week, Peter Barnes handed out an article entitled “Don’t Waste a Crisis.” In it, Pastor John Ortberg shares the results of a nationwide survey on spiritual growth. It turns out that the number one contributor to spiritual growth is not great teaching, small groups, energetic worship or even meaningful service. What is it that contributes most to people’s spiritual growth? What do you think? It was suffering. People said they grew more during season of loss, pain and crisis than they did at any other time. It seems that crises, while unwanted open windows of opportunity. It’s as if in normal life we are on a treadmill busy running - morning noon and night – running somewhere - running after something – it might be money, security, or success. And then suddenly adversity hits and we get thrown off the treadmill and everything stops. Suffering opens our eyes to the folly of chasing after temporal gods. When people encounter adversity – when they get thrown off the treadmill, more often than not they say they want to do things differently – they don’t want to return to their old way of life when things normalize.”

Suffering challenges our perspectives and more often than not turns our worlds upside down...or right side up reawakening us to the reality that we are not in control, but dependent upon God. We are forced to reckon with the impermanence of life on earth and so we reevaluate our priorities asking ourselves what is after all most important.

Is it possible that Paul’s right – that it is in weakness that we are strongest? (1 Cor. 12.10) That when we “get out of the way” – when our pretenses and defenses are shattered, when we feel most vulnerable that God’s Spirit can shine most brightly in us and through us. What an upside down idea and so once again we are reminded that

The Way of the Spirit is UPSIDE DOWN. God calls us to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow him. In doing so, we do not know where He will lead us, what decisions and partings it will require but writes Bonhoeffer, “We do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy” and that “Discipleship means joy.”

Jesus said “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”

3. The Way of the Spirit is the way of relinquishment.

These words speak of relinquishment – that is of letting something go or giving something up. Hmmm. We aren’t so fond of that in 21st century America – just look at the storage facilities that dot our landscape...We are all about MORE - accumulation and achievement are considered inherently better.

But if we stop for a moment to reflect on reality, we realize that even when we satisfy our hunger for more, our feelings of contentment are short lived. Before long we’re on a quest to obtain the next thing that promises to bring fulfillment – another phone, another car, another job, another house.... New acquisitions and achievements thrill and gratify - briefly, but soon those feelings of satisfaction wear off and we want something more.

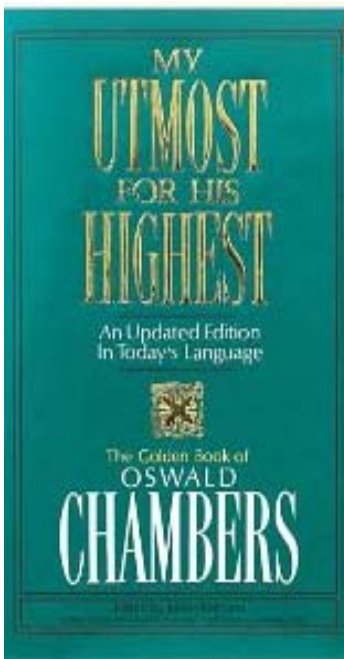


We are conditioned to expect growth – and think that the acquisition of new facts and understanding is the solution to almost every problem...if we only knew better then we'd change. But spiritual growth is different. It seems it cannot be packaged, programmed or taught. Although some new facts and ideas may help us along the way it's really about transformation and in many respects unlearning some of the things we've come to believe and undoing some of the habitual practices we've grown accustomed to. Things are not what they seem...and God's ways are not our ways...(Addiction and Grace, p 107) Spiritual growth it turns out is a lot more about relinquishment than about acquisition.

Take the Apostle Paul, born in Tarsus but brought up in Jerusalem and thoroughly trained in the law under Gamaliel, a strict and zealous Pharisee. He saw himself as faultless in terms of legalistic righteousness, a man who tried very hard to please God. But after encountering the Risen Christ, he chose to relinquish all that. He was forced to reinterpret and reexamine everything he had believed. And his commitment to follow Jesus was costly... He became a man who faced danger day in and day out, constantly on the move, laboring and toiling often lacking adequate food or shelter – and at the same time feeling great pressure for the welfare of the church (2 Cor. 11). Paul endured great hardship, but still he wrote to the Philippians, "Whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of

Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found

in him..." Oswald Chambers was a gifted artist and musician who trained at London's Royal Academy of Art, but after an agonizing internal battle to discern God's direction for his life decided to enter the ministry. After attending seminary, he traveled and taught in America and Japan and eventually started his own Bible College in England. However, when World War I broke out, Chambers felt called to serve troops and so he took a position as a YMCA Chaplain in Egypt. Two years later, in 1917, Chambers died in Cairo of complications following an emergency appendectomy. After his death, his wife Biddy returned to England with their 4 year old daughter and began the



in the

painstaking work of transcribing the notes she had taken during her husband's lectures throughout their married life. She began to send out the transcriptions to friends and acquaintances and eventually the pamphlets were combined into book form and in 1927 "My Utmost for His Highest." Since then it has remained continually in print – a bestselling devotional classic that has been translated into 42 languages.

Chambers writes, "No one is ever united with Jesus Christ until he is willing to relinquish not sin only, but his whole way of looking at things." To be born from above of the Spirit of God means that we must let go before we lay hold, and in the first stages it is the relinquishing of all pretense...Then the Spirit of God will



show us what further there is to relinquish. There will have to be the relinquishing of my claim to my right to myself in every phase. Am I willing to relinquish my hold on all I possess, my hold on my affections, and on everything, and to be identified with the death of Jesus Christ...It is not just a question of giving up sin, but of giving up my natural independence and self-assertiveness, and this is where the battle has to be fought.”

The way of the Spirit is UPSIDE DOWN. It is the way of loosening our grip on whatever we are hanging on to so that we can receive what God wants to give us. It is the way of relinquishing our independence and self-assertiveness, a way of surrender. I find for myself that this is not a one time proposition – again and again the Spirit reveals my attachments – attachments even to good things – things that I think are right and God pleasing – even with those God invites me to let go and trust Him... What are you holding on today? What is God inviting you to lose – to release and to surrender to him acknowledging your powerlessness and trusting in His love and faithfulness.

Conclusion

The Way of the Spirit is UPSIDE DOWN; God not only calls the most unlikely to accomplish His purposes, but He also calls us those who will follow to deny themselves, take up the cross and relinquish everything. This is NOT the way of the world...It is counter cultural and counter intuitive...

Rather than an upside down house, it is the Christ on the Cross, who best captures just how upside down God’s Kingdom is. God and man, life and death, good and evil are all there. Such a mystery. Such a paradox – we tend to want to rush right by Good Friday, to resolve the tension as quickly as we can. Prominent evangelical Thomas Howard, who became a Catholic at the age of 50 has said, “There is a point of view, widespread among non Catholic Christians, that dismisses the Crucifix with the remark, “Oh – we worship a Risen Christ.” This notion is not in itself wholly false, namely that Good Friday was not the end of the story. Easter followed forthwith...However, he says, what the eye of faith perceives in the Crucifix is a mystery of such fathomless depth that it is not an event to be set to one side too quickly...Yes, sin, sorrow, suffering and death itself were indeed taken away at the Cross, but we mortals must take the time to enter into the depths of such a mystery...” The truth is we don’t much like the idea that God chooses the weak and the foolish, we resist the cross and we hang on dearly to everything we have...

In just another week, we will begin our Lenten Journey – a time for prayer, reflection and spiritual preparation. What if we took these words of Jesus to heart and considered how we might practice some form of self denial or relinquishment this year –not as a way to earn brownie points with God or make ourselves feel good and not something particularly dramatic, but rather a small way to say No to the tyranny of self and Yes to God – to allow more space for God’s upside down kingdom in our lives. Perhaps God is inviting you to take a day off - a Sabbath - or at least to forego doing laundry one day a week. Or perhaps you could join in one of the centering prayer classes, consider fasting from a meal or two or try praying on your knees ...Sounds upside down but a little change might bring a fresh perspective, a new wave of the Spirit and a glimpse of the life for which we hunger and for which we were created.

Let us pray...

