

# The Ripple Effect

## *Freedom: Surrender Your Life*

Mark 14:17-27-42

April 1, 2007

In the summer of my 11<sup>th</sup> year of life, I learned the power and joy of surrender. It happened in Minnesota at the Edina community swimming pool high dive. For the previous five summers I would watch – in admiration and terror – the big kids climb 35 steps straight into thin air and walk on to a long concrete diving board. Then they actually jumped off the plank, plunging into the cool water below. For a few agonizing seconds they disappeared in the deep end only to remerge alive and whole, beaming with delight. I avoided the high dive and wouldn't even come close to the "deep end." But when my buddies and even some girls started plunging off the high dive, I knew I had to save face. "Un-coolness" was worse than plunging into certain death. So on a humid day in July, with my stomach reeling and my leg joints wilting, I climbed the 35 steps into thin air that led to the plank. As I walked out on the plank, everything within me said, "You fool, turn around and go down. You can still live." But as I started to backpedal and look over my shoulder, I saw the line of friends and older kids and girls chuckling and I knew I must jump. So creeping to the edge of the plank, I looked over the edge and finally let go. I jumped. Down and down I plunged, hitting the water like a stone, sinking even lower into my watery grave. So this is how they die, I thought. Some people hit the water and never come back up. They get sucked through a grate at the bottom of the pool and turned into chlorine. But then – surprise – could it be? Yes, I came up again and I was alive! Wet, dazed, but utterly alive! And not only alive, but transformed, liberated and renewed. I shook what used to be a thick head of wet hair and laughed. I had let go of everything and lived to tell about it. I was alive, more alive than ever. I had tasted the joy of surrender.

Keep that image in mind as we walk through this story from the Gospel of Mark. As we explore this story we'll see that surrender, letting go and trusting God with our lives, is central to our journey with Christ. We can't come to Christ without what I'll call the "Big Surrender." The Big Surrender involves dethroning ourselves and our smaller gods of control or money or fame or power or lust and placing Jesus on the throne of our heart. We confess Jesus as the One who saves us from our sin and who guides us as Lord of our lives. But we can't continue to live with Christ without "Little Surrenders" or those daily decisions that proclaim, "Jesus, I choose to let go and trust you in this specific area of my life. It has become MINE, not yours; but I choose to surrender, to let go." Both the Big Surrender and almost all Little Surrenders plunge us into a loss of control. That's why we cling to our secure planks and refuse to give them up. Initially surrender seems overwhelming and frightening. But surrender is the path of freedom, joy, delight and impact. So if you want to find real joy, if you want your life to have a ripple affect on others, then learn to let go and trust God.

So how do we do that? How do begin to tell God, “Here’s my one and only life God. Take it all?” In this passage Jesus doesn’t demand and threaten us to surrender; he shows us how to surrender; he shows us what a surrendered life looks like.

Let’s pick up the story in Mark 14:27. After they’ve just celebrated the first Lord’s Supper, Jesus turns to his closest followers and makes a sober prediction, “You will all fall away...” Jesus’ prediction includes a strong word in the original Greek language of the New Testament, which basically meant “you will all stumble and fall flat on your faces.” So Jesus is saying, “You can’t handle this by yourself. You need to let go and ask God for help in this dark hour.” But rather than listen to Jesus, Peter beats his chest with macho bravado and trumpets; “Aw, come on Jesus, even if all fall away, I will not.” Jesus tries to warn Peter: “I tell you the truth (whenever Jesus starts this way you better pay attention), today – yes, tonight – before the rooster crows twice you yourself (not the others Peter, but you!) will disown me three times.” The “three times” hammers home to Peter how far he’s capable of falling. Stubborn, self-willed, hard-headed Peter is appalled and offended by Jesus’ suggestion. So he insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.”

Peter perfectly exemplifies an un-surrendered life. What does an un-surrendered person look like? First, the un-surrendered person constantly says to God and others, “Don’t worry: I got it. I got it. I can handle it. I will never fall flat on my face.” Un-surrendered people refuse to face the darkness and weakness in their own souls. And rather than take responsibility for our darkness and weakness, we constantly judge and compare ourselves to others - “even if all fall away, I will not.” Here’s a sobering truth: it’s easy to stand in judgment over others, to wag a finger and say, “Why did he do that? Why did she handle it that way? Wow, did they ever blow it there.” And then, suddenly, we find ourselves in places of pressure and temptation and threat – we’re really in the thick of life’s bloody battle for good and evil - and we blow it. We were over our heads and we missed the mark. We sin and our sin wounds others – sometimes it hurts those we love the most without even trying.

So, Peter seems to swagger with an attitude of: *What’s to surrender? I got it. Or if I don’t “got it,” I’ll get it together.* In a few hours Peter, the un-surrendered man, will face a battle way over his head, something that nothing in life could have prepared him for – and he will stumble and fall flat on his face. There’s a price tag to an un-surrendered life, but there’s also a better way to live – and Jesus doesn’t just stand on the sidelines and call out advice; no, he actually lives a surrendered life and he empowers us to walk this path as well.

In verse 32 it says, “They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said, ‘Sit here while I pray.’” Gethsemane probably meant the place of the oil-press. It was the place where the farmers pressed and squeezed the olives and turned it into rich olive oil. Our Gethsemanes are those places where we feel life squeezing us and threatening to overwhelm us. Notice that even Jesus, the Eternal Son of God, the One who existed since all eternity past in perfect and unbroken union of love and joy with the Father and the Spirit, now, as a human being, faces a great test. Verse 33 tells us that he was

“deeply distressed” and “troubled.” From the moment of his baptism on, Jesus would be thrown into a great battle. Here’s the truth: eventually, we’ll all hit our own oil press. We can delay, we can try to dance around it, but eventually, like Jesus, we will face distress and trouble.

Notice the difference between Jesus and Peter: when life started to squeeze them, Peter refuse to surrender and said, “I got it. I can handle it on my own.” In contrast, Jesus, God the Son, surrenders to God the Father and says, “I don’t have it on my own. I need you. We need each other. Father, help me.”

Let’s pause here because this is simply astounding. If the Eternal Son of God lives to surrender and surrenders to live, doesn’t that tell us something about reality? Surrender isn’t some weird, ultra-religious, once-in-a-lifetime act; surrender is woven into the universe; surrender is woven into the person of God as a Trinity of Love. The Son surrenders to the Father. The Father seeks to honor the Son. The Spirit points back to both the Father and the Son. The Father and the Son send the Spirit as their representative. Do you see how surrender is woven into the very being of God and the fabric of the universe? This is crucial because surrender strikes us as scary and weird. Imagine that you’ve broken out of prison and you’re now on the run, panting and sweating, frantically hiding from the God of the universe, the Cosmic Sheriff, who comes with his handcuffs and bullhorn, shouting, “Okay, you’re surrounded. Come out with your hands up or I’ll annihilate you.” And so, with our hands up, we come out of hiding. We hang our head in shame and fear or maybe even anger and defiance, but we don’t have a better alternative. So we surrender, we wave the white flag, we give up.

Is that what we mean by surrender? Absolutely not. Let’s look at how Jesus surrendered. Notice, first of all, that surrender is a response to love, not fear. Again, Jesus doesn’t tell us to surrender; he shows us how to surrender. By his actions Jesus is saying, “When it comes to surrender, you could never say, ‘I got it.’ You can’t do this on your own. You’ll never make that long walk to the end of the diving board and then let go ... unless I show you how to do it. So as your leader, your Savior and your God, I’ll show you how to surrender. Now begin right here.” Now look carefully at verse 36 and how Jesus begins this prayer of surrender – because our whole view and approach to surrender depends on these two words: Abba, Father. In those two words Jesus will radically redefine forever and for all peoples the religious quest. God is not the Cosmic Sheriff hunting us down and forcing us to submit. Nor is God some vague force of goodness or beauty. God is our Abba, Father. Abba was a word from Jesus mother-tongue of Aramaic that meant “Daddy” or “Papa.” It’s an intensely personal and intimate address for God – so intimate that most people of Jesus’ day would be aghast to use such boldness and familiarity with God. Amazingly, the early church retained this word as a way for all who are in Christ to address God (see Romans 8:15).

True surrender is never just a response to fear; it’s a response to love. Should we fear God? Yes, God is awesome and holy and just – and we aren’t. But real and lasting surrender is fueled by love. Notice Jesus: He isn’t afraid of his Father; he loves His father. The Father doesn’t want to destroy the Son; the Father loves the Son. Everything

in our spiritual lives flows out of this same love. That is the spring of Christian spirituality. O, how quickly we wander from that spring! We serve God and try to surrender because we're afraid or driven by our duty and rules and laws and shame. Brothers and sisters, let's help each other find our way back to the spring. That's why we need each other. That's why I need you: I keep losing the spring of love and then I don't know how or where to surrender. That's why we need to encourage one another and say, "Come to the spring where the Father and Son and Holy Spirit love each other."

Jesus believes all of that but notice the next phrase in this simple prayer of surrender: "take this cup from me." What was the cup and why did Jesus want to avoid it? It wasn't just the cup of death or the cup of suffering. The cup meant the full measure of our sin and its consequences. The Bible is very clear that when Jesus died he died for us, for our sins. Now that's a wild concept. Imagine all our sins – our pride and hate and envy and lust and cruel words that inflict pain or words of gossip or the shallow insensitivity that ignores the pain of others, plus the really bad stuff that we'd rather not mention, plus all the world's awful sins like rape and murder and genocide and injustice – all of this will be absorbed into Jesus when he goes to the cross, crashing on his utterly pure heart in wave after wave after wave. Now you know why he prays, "Take this cup from me." No human being could ever begin to imagine the horror and moral darkness that descended on Jesus when he became sin for us.

Notice something else about surrender: it's a struggle, even for Jesus. It's part of a real relationship between God the Son and God the Father. Some people assume that prayer and faith and religious lingo like surrender requires a pious and quiet acceptance of our fate in life. I often talk to people who were given a message – by spiritual leaders – that basically said: Just sit down, shut up and don't ask questions. Your needs and desires and thoughts don't matter. Notice that Jesus doesn't approach the spiritual life that way. Jesus clearly articulates what he wants: "Abba, Father...Take this cup away from me." God, find a Plan B to save the world. Jesus asked directly, clearly and boldly for what he needed and wanted.

But then notice the difference: "Yet not what I will, but what you will." Earlier Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy will be done"; now Jesus practices what he preaches. In one of the most tender and moving scenes in the entire Bible, the Son, praying through agony in tears, asks for something specific. Now throughout his life when Jesus asked – for bread to feed the masses or power to raise the dead or cast out demons or heal the sick or give sight to the blind – the power came immediately. It flowed out of him. But now Jesus asks for something specific and yet at the same time he surrenders his will to His Father's will. We all know that it's easy to do God's will, serve God's will, fight for God's will ... until God's will infringes on our will. Then we howl in protest. Hey, that's not fair, we tell God. I want my way.

But Jesus shows us another way: Surrender. Let go. (Release the rock). Leave it in the Father's hands. Someone once asked me, "Is this the same thing as believing in fate." I thought about it for a minute and then said, "No, not at all. Fate is impersonal. It's like trusting in a big, complex set of gears – they grind on and on but you hope that eventually

they'll grind in the right direction. Jesus is showing us the way of love and trust in a Heavenly Father who is for us not against us. This is a God who can do all things. Everything is possible for him. When we place our lives in God's hands there are no freakish accidents. God can take all the loose ends, broken pieces and dead ends – like a cruel and shameful death on a cross – and turn them into something beautiful. This is trust in our Abba, Father. Even in the midst of his darkest hour, God the Father tells God the Son, “Let it go. Surrender. I have something better for you. Something you can't fully fathom right now: it's called the resurrection. Trust me.”

I said earlier that all of us have a big Surrender to make. Have you made the Big Surrender? Let's return to the image of the high dive. Where are you in this story? Perhaps you're on the concrete saying, “This is ridiculous. Why should I climb this board? This isn't even rational. How can I rationally prove that the board is trustworthy? Ha, I can't therefore it must not exist.” First, we take the life of the mind with utmost seriousness. Your mind matters to God. Many of us have thought long and hard about difficult questions of faith and it's made our faith stronger not weaker. We value that process at TVC. But let me also say that, in one sense, you're right: it's not entirely rational. But then again honor, love, loyalty, sacrifice, commitment and love – are any of these entirely rational? Is it always rational to trust your friend or to not cheat on your spouse? Can you prove it in a laboratory? Sometimes we don't know until we climb the steps, put our weight on the platform and go out to the edge and jump. We don't really know until we let go.

So that's the Big Surrender. All of us have little surrenders. We battle with them every day. We refuse to let go as we pray, “Honestly, God, I would rather have it my way rather than your way.” But whenever we do that, we're pursuing less joy, less peace, less power. Look at Jesus: His power came from a life of surrender. His joy came from a life of surrender. Peter lost his power by refusing to surrender. Some of you are holding on to things that you are refusing to surrender. Lustful images. Bitterness and an unforgiving spirit. A spouse that just won't change. An imaginary spouse that will come and rescue you from everything. A passivity that says, “Just leave me alone: I don't want to change and you can't make me.” Perhaps you're clinging to an idol called money or image or comfort or control - aka “my way or the highway.”

Here's the invitation from Jesus this morning: let it go. (Release the rock). God has something better for you. But you may say, “But I can't do that. It's impossible. I keep letting go and grabbing it back again. I'll do it so imperfectly.” But this leads us into the heart of the Gospel: look at this passage again. Remember Jesus doesn't demand that we surrender; he just shows us how it's done. We approach God as our Abba, Father because we come in and through Jesus. Because we come through Christ, the one who offered a perfect surrender to the Father, God will accept our imperfect acts of surrender.