

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Genesis 17: 1-7; Mark 8: 31-35
“I Believe...We Trust: That in Losing Our Lives, We Will Save Them”
2nd Sunday in Lent
March 2, 2015

Our theme this Lenten season here at Davidson College Presbyterian Church is “I Believe...We Trust.” The first statement “I Believe” is from the Apostles’ Creed, one of the two oldest creeds in the Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the other being the Nicene Creed. The second is from the newest creed in the Book of Confessions, the Brief Statement of Faith written not long after the formation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1983.

Today’s two Scripture lessons are tailor-made for highlighting the “I” of the Apostles’ Creed, and the “we” of the Brief Statement of Faith. Then we encounter God’s call and promise both to individuals, the “I” in us, and to the community of faith, the “we” of which we are a part as Christian disciples.

We have heard both the “I” and the “we” in today’s Old Testament lesson, the Genesis story of God’s call to a covenantal relationship with the “I” who is Abraham and God’s promise to be with the “we” who are Abraham’s descendants for all time. Listen for these same emphases in Mark’s recounting of Jesus’s teaching to the Twelve and then to the crowd who join the disciples in the mobile classroom he sets up as he makes a stop on his road trip through the villages of Caesarea Philippi.

31Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

34He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

If you want to save your life, you must lose it.

This is what Jesus teaches.

And it is a great paradox, is it not?

Certainly it is a paradox which we experience in our individual lives in various ways.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch-born priest who laid down his acclaimed career as a scholar and professor teaching at the University of Notre Dame and at both Yale and Harvard Divinity Schools in order to pick up a calling to live as a brother to physically and mentally challenged residents in the L’Arche Daybreak community in Ontario, Canada, has written of the paradox as experienced in our individual lives in this way, “The great paradox of life is that those who lose their lives will gain them. This paradox becomes visible in very ordinary situations. If we cling to our friends, we may lose them, but if we are nonpossessive in our relationships, we will make many friends. If fame is what we seek or desire, it often vanishes as soon as we acquire it, but if we have no need to be known, we might be remembered long after our deaths. When we want to be in the centre, we easily end up on the margins, but when we are free enough to be wherever we must be, we often find ourselves in the centre. Giving our lives for others is the greatest of all human acts. This will gain us our lives.” (1)

Giving one’s life for the sake of another is the greatest of all human acts. Our supreme example of this, of course, is Jesus, but he means for us to know that the call to let go of self in order to be free to find the promise of life that is deeper and wider, richer and more beautiful, fulfilled in us is no less our calling than it was his. Henri Nouwen came to know a richness of life and a deeper understanding and relationship to Christ in living among the residents of L’Arche Daybreak than he had ever known at Notre Dame, Harvard, or Yale, as wonderful as his work and his

relationships were in those places. You can tell your own stories of how it has happened for you. Some of you might tell a similar story to my 94-year-old friend, Ken, who likes to say, "I'm living proof that you can teach an old dog new tricks", of how you let go of the mighty effort that you were expending in trying to control a relationship with a spouse or a child or a colleague or a friend and thus gained mutuality, respect, and love that was a miracle in its unfolding. Others of you might tell of how with great fear and trembling you laid down a career that provided you with a hefty bank account and comfortable lifestyle but robbed you of your soul and what you gained in return was time and space to breathe deeply again and to pray and to invest in relationships and to serve and simply to be more the you who was conceived in the gracious mind and heart of the Creator are meant to be.

We are called to lay our lives down for the sake of others, but the question eventually comes: Once we have been emptied of our egos and the narcissistic impulses that have kept us self-centered and self-occupied for so long, what particular crosses are we to pick up?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and writer who was imprisoned and then literally laid down his life as he was executed by the Nazi regime, asked the question, "How is a disciple to know which is his or her cross? We receive it upon entering the discipleship of the suffering Lord, and come to recognize it in the community of Jesus." (2)

In other words, we find the road map which leads to the particular cross which we are to take up as a disciple of Jesus as we make our individual journeys in community, as we participate in the "we," that is the church.

Whenever we say the Apostles' Creed, we affirm "I believe in the holy catholic church," that is, "I" believe in the "we." (As it happens, this is the phrase of the Apostles' Creed which the confirmation class will be studying when we meet this evening.)

A minister friend of mine, Consuelo Donahue, circulated an amusing little video which gives us a pretty good picture of what we mean when we say, "I believe in the "we" that is the catholic (with a lower case 'c' meaning universal) church."

The minister in this little video speaks for every minister I know who has sat on a plane and heard a passenger seated next to him or her ask the dreaded question, "And what do you do for a living?" (and by the way, every minister I know has both funny and dreadful stories to tell about what happened once they answered the question.)

"Hello," said the seatmate. "Hello."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to Singapore. Where are you going?"

"I'm going to Australia. What do you do?"

She told him. "And what do you do?"

"Well.....I work for a global enterprise. We have outlets in every country in the world."

"Have you now?"

"Yes. We have hospitals and hospices and homeless shelters. We do marriage work and have feeding programs and educational programs. We do all sorts of justice and reconciliation work. Basically we look after people from birth to death. We deal in the area of behavior alteration!"

"Wow!"

Her wow was so loud that every head on that plane which was sitting on the tarmac at Heathrow Airport swiveled in their direction.

"What's it called?"

"It's called the church!!!!"

"oh."

The minister went on to say to those who were listening to him tell his story, "You see...if we follow Jesus, we are a part of a global enterprise. You could even say that we are a part of an intergalactic enterprise because we also include everyone who has gone before us."(3)

Through the church, the global enterprise, the intergalactic enterprise, which is also his body, Jesus teaches us how to loosen *our* grip on the parts of our lives that are killing us so that we can pick up the crosses which will give us life, abundant life. For instance, we loosen our grip on our money as we put pledges and tithes in the offering plate to support the church's work in the world, those homeless programs, efforts for justice and reconciliation, etc. etc. etc. that the global enterprise that is the church carries out in every country in the world, and the result is that the money and worries about money loosen their grip on us, a true gift in the money-obsessed culture in which we live. For instance,

we loosen our grip on our smartphones for 15 minutes or ½ hour each morning and fold our hands and close our eyes in prayer, and the result is that our hearts are made more tender and we are released from the grudges that have been holding our spirits captive for what seems like forever, a true gift in the blaming, shaming surround-sound that blares forth at us from every direction.

In closing, listen to these words of Bill Wylie Kellermann, ““To keep Lent is to discover and remember who in heaven’s name we are, as person and community. We pray against all confusers and confusions for our true identity and vocation. We know that means standing before the cross and making some choices. The grace of this season is that Jesus suffers the choice with us. He’s been over the turf and is our brother exactly on that score, with us in the struggle of our hearts. Let the further grace be that we make our choice as disciples, in the mind and heart of Christ.” (4)

1. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: Reflections for Each Day of the Year* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 138.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Quoted in *Resources for Preaching and Worship, Year B*, compiled by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 94.
3. <https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=815124448524086&set=vr.815124448524086&type=2&theater>
4. Bill Wylie Kellermann, *Seasons of Faith and Conscience: Kairos, Confession, Liturgy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 166.