

March 11, 2018

Mark 10:28-31
Luke 18:28-30
Matthew 19:27-30

RENUNCIATION

CALL TO WORSHIP

*Like an eagle teaching her young to fly,
catching them safely on her spreading wings,
the Lord kept Israel from falling.*

(Deuteronomy 32:11)

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

(Lamentations 3:22-23)

INVOCATION

Lord God, you entered this world to show us the Way to enter your Kingdom. You became one of us so that we could become one with you. And by sending your Spirit into the fray after the cross and resurrection of your Son, there is now no space or place, no body or soul, no relationship or community that cannot have something of your presence and guidance if they want to.

When seasons change, you change not. When hearts break, you are near. When storms scatter us, you remain rooted in us, reminding us that an eternal home with you awaits your pilgrim people. When surrounded by the repercussions of doing your will, may we recall in faith that you take into consideration more than we can fathom long before you tell each of us what to do. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Fill our bodies, your temples, once again in this and every hour, enabling us to worship you alone. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

“What about us?” said Peter. “We have left everything to follow you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you: there is no one who has given up home, brothers or sisters, mother, father or children, or land, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive in this age a hundred times as much – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and land – and persecutions besides; and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Mark 10:28-31)

Peter said, “What about us? We left all we had to follow you.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you: there is no one who has given up home, or wife, brothers, parents, or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not be repaid many times over in this age, and in the age to come have eternal life.” (Luke 18:28-30)

Then Peter said, “What about us? We have left everything to follow you. How shall we fare?” Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you: in the world that is to be, when the Son of Man is seated on his glorious throne, you also will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And anyone who has left houses, or brothers or sisters, or father or mother, or children, or land for the sake of my name will be repaid many times over, and gain eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Matthew 19:27-30)

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There are as many spiritual diseases as there are physical ones. What catches the eye and threatens survival here desires to have tyranny over all our time and attention so that little is left to address the root causes of our collective condition here. What is visible to us now is often the manifestation of what is unseen, both in the spiritual realms and in the neglected places of our hearts. Until we as a human race stop striving to defeat evil by our own strength and intelligence, until we partner with God in the task, we will continue to multiply the very thing we seek to eliminate.

Someone who renounces something for Jesus does not run away or walk away from this battle. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote that there are two common approaches to dealing with spiritual disease: healing via human strength alone, or passively waiting upon God to do everything. People who have never renounced much of anything for Jesus' sake tend to think that those who do are escaping from evil instead running toward the Savior. But there is a difference between someone who walks away from the battle and someone who renounces both approaches because Jesus has called them into His Way of dealing with injustice.

Jesus is the only One who has power to deal with the root causes and consequences of evil. And if we are not following Him, then we are dealing with symptoms at best. Under His authority we receive the capacity to render the work of centuries of evil to nothing with a single prayer or action or mustard seed of obedient faith. The appearances of evil often remain and the history books stay the same, but most of God's victories are hidden from us and the world. It's not that they are not there; we just do not notice them. We may not be able to stop evil from happening, but Jesus gives us the power to render it completely fruitless where it matters most.

The church needs physicians of the soul as well as physicians of the body to deal with what does not come from God. Jesus treated spiritual and physical diseases in His lifetime, and the distinction between them was far more permeable than it is today. Spiritual diseases can have physical causes, and physical diseases can have spiritual causes. What happens to a body infected with disease

can be a necessary mirror waking us up to what a diseased soul might be experiencing within.

The downside of Christianity's appropriation of Greek philosophy was that the faithful began to perceive more separation between the soul and the body than our Jewish ancestors passed on to us. The body is not a prison to be escaped. It is an intricately woven temple in which the soul worships the Spirit of God, and the resurrection of Christ points to a state of being that is not devoid of physicality. What is a spiritual body that can eat and drink and yet also disappear? The story seems to point to a complete integration of physical and spiritual reality, not a false choice between materialism or spiritualism.

That said, if we could always see the true condition of our souls, we would commit to this church as though our very lives depended upon it. And if people in our greater community could see this too, such a sight might snap several of them out of their indifference. We are here because we are sick and we know it. Every time we walk through these doors, we are admitting to ourselves and to one another that we are sinners who seek ongoing reconciliation with God. Communion, prayer, disciple bands, retreats, fellowship, friendship, most of the spiritual disciplines – these are some of Christ's essential medicines intended to keep us healthy in the midst of life here. Why do some of us balk at and avoid these gifts from Jesus, when we would do the opposite if a skilled physician prescribed them?

I say all this because renunciation is one of Jesus' greatest medicines. He uses it to treat anything from a lack of true purpose and meaning in one's life to unhealthy attachments to a lack of trust in God. Our initial reaction to spiritual disease is that it is not as important as cancer or mental illness. But it affects our quality of life just as much. Spiritual disease is more subtle and widespread, but it is just as real, and it affects how we perceive our daily lives and blessings.

Lent is a time when people give up something for a season, and by Pentecost it is usually back in their life again. There is nothing wrong with this. Most of what we are called to give up for a season of life is not evil. But permanent renunciation raises a lot of fear and misunderstanding. To think that Jesus might ask us to renounce something or someone without explanation or notice sounds like the opposite of healing at first. It sounds like deprivation.

This fear surrounding renunciation makes it seem like God is the sort of parent who gives his child a really nice toy and then takes it away on a whim. Sometimes Jesus' teaching on renunciation conjures up images of monks and nuns tucked away in monasteries, as though there are parts of the gospel that have applications for certain Christians but not for all of us.

I suppose that if someone has a particularly aggressive spiritual disease and a genuine call, some sort of monastic life would be appropriate. Of course we all have an aggressive spiritual disease called sin, and God's special call for each person is sufficient to provide structure for their regeneration and renewal. A call from God requires us to renounce the world's call upon us. God always places before us a specific path of obedience and a path of disobedience. The first is life and the second is death, and each of us must renounce one to accept the other.

Rarely are we free from negative influences when we respond to God's grace. If there are people around us who actively oppose God's call upon our lives, or if they remain indifferent to the most important thing that's ever happened to us, then Jesus might ask us to renounce and turn them over to His care, too. Oftentimes it does not come to that. Still, the history of the church is replete with children of God who experienced social isolation and persecution from former friends and family and even spouses who knew them before they started following Jesus on a deeper level than those around them were comfortable with.

But if we are following Jesus, what do we care what the consequences are? If we are following Jesus, what happens as a result is not our concern. If we appear successful and responsible for following Jesus, so be it. If we appear irresponsible and shortsighted, so be it. Consequences are very important to people who want to remain in control of their own lives. A calculating person – a person who does everything for the sake of the result they think it will bring – will have a very hard time following Jesus because doing so means leaving the calculation to Him as we wait and pray until the way forward becomes *clear*, not desirable.

We pray to become aware of what the Holy Spirit is thinking and calculating for the sake of the Kingdom and our role in it. People have all sorts of ways and indicators and methods that they use to make their own decisions. They all sound very intelligent and reasonable

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at first, until you realize that the one thing they all leave out of the equation is the possibility of God communicating his will to us. But following Jesus means renouncing our freedom to make our own decisions and our own relationships. It means desiring to be controlled by the Holy Spirit in every area of life. What happens as a result is no longer our concern. It means learning to recognize the people and the purpose for which Jesus has sent them into our lives. Whether or not they are Christian has nothing to do with whether or not the Spirit has sent them to us.

A friend of mine once shared with me a drawing of a young girl tightly holding onto her beloved teddy bear. In front of her was Jesus commanding her to let go and turn it over to Him. All the while, behind His back He had a better teddy bear waiting for her that she could not see. She was fighting to hold onto the teddy bear she had always had because she did not trust the surprise Jesus had prepared. Every time Jesus asks us to turn something over to Him and His care, He always has something better waiting for us as well as a better purpose for the thing or person we give up.

I am not suggesting that everyone completely reevaluate all their most important relationships. Jesus is about strengthening relationships. And it is Him giving us a specific commandment to love someone that makes two people “meant to be” in this world. If we claim every benefit of the commandment and continue to obey Him in how we love that person, He will not tell us to stop loving them. But following Jesus always outranks following other people. We make mistakes and sometimes we cannot live above every situation that forces us to choose between rather than to prioritize Jesus and someone else. So here is the promise again: *“... anyone who has left houses, or brothers or sisters, or father or mother, or children, or land for the sake of my name will be repaid many times over, and gain eternal life.”* He does not say we will never be reunited or reconciled with them. He is simply saying that if following Him happens to lead us away from the people and places we know the best, He will greatly bless us.

This is Jesus’ way of saying, “Hey, you are worth way more than what’s in your life. I’ve got better plans for you. And don’t worry. I’ve got better plans for them, too. Come, follow me.”

There is so much more to renunciation than its capacity to heal spiritual disease. The omniscience of God – God’s power to see past, present, and future from the purview of eternity – is unavoidable.

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Most of us are fairly predictable, anyway. I would imagine knowing in advance all the consequences of our choices and responses is one of God's easier tasks. But to stop there is bad theology and bad psychology. The only destinies God has prepared for his children are good ones, but we have a hard time receiving them and trusting in their goodness.

God works against what he knows about our future. God is constantly seeking to make the future better for every person who will let him, in this life and the life to come. There is no one in Hell who does not want to be there, and I'm not using Dante's imagery. There is nothing about the past, present, or future that God cannot handle or change, because God's capacity for creativity is unmatched and unpredictable. Sometimes the wheels of cause and effect make us feel like, good or bad, we get what we deserve – nothing more – and everything here is fair and just. That is wishful thinking. Jesus calls us to reap what we have not sown, good and bad. That's what starts to happen when we follow Him out of the playground and into the warzone. God sent Jesus to thrust sticks of grace into the wheels of our decisions. Renunciation is one of those sticks.

During my senior year of high school, I decided to go out for the lacrosse team. One of the first things I noticed was that the more experienced a player was, the less padding and armor they wore. The less experienced a player was, the more pads and armor they wore. Some players preferred the agility and freedom that came with uninhibited movement. Less armor enabled them to score more goals and make better passes, whereas the new players preferred the protection and security of the padding and armor. It enabled them to absorb more hits and slashes with less damage.

So it is with Jesus and renunciation. Each of us will become a better spiritual warrior and have more breakthroughs if we can do without certain things when Jesus asks us to give them up for His sake.

In addition to being a medicine, a spoke of grace, and a tactic of spiritual warfare, renunciation is also one of the best investments anyone can make this side of paradise, even though a financial advisor would probably never mention it to us. It is available to every person. It is backed by the infinite resources of the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of a God who can back up his promises out of nothing. And according to Jesus' promise in the passages I read, we will receive far more for what we already have that we give up for Him than for what we give to Jesus or for what we do for Jesus.

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If we part with our home, our homeland, our blood family, or anything or anyone only because Jesus directly instructed us to do so, we are guaranteed to receive a home, a promised land, and a faith family many times over in this age – and in the age to come, to gain eternal life. Imagine a home and a land waiting for you in the Kingdom of God that death cannot take from you. Imagine a family waiting to welcome you that death cannot separate from you. It is an investment more certain than death and taxes, and it does not just benefit *us*; it also gives everyone we give up for Jesus an opportunity to make the same investment and receive the same things. And if Jesus tells us to make such an investment, then He also has a tailor-made plan for exactly what that will look like in today's world of possibility.

PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

Sometimes we are held back by what others see as our gifts, O Lord. What others want, we catch ourselves dreaming of giving away for your sake. What others seek, we now know better than to seek again, yet what do we do now that it's here? Unlimited wealth and abject poverty, abundant health and dire illness, worldly wisdom and worldly foolishness – are two sides of the same lost coin. Yet you know what we need and what we must experience for a while to become truly grateful for our own life. May we not land on heads or tails, O Lord. Please stop the coin from spinning, and roll us down your Way. Keep us upright on truth's edge, renouncing all that would cause us to stumble and fall on either side before your Kingdom comes. And if we do, may we let you save us from all things, chance and luck included, so that by your cross and resurrection, we may drink deeply from the life you taught us to pray into the world, saying, *“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 sin as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”*

BENEDICTION (Philemon 4:7)

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.