

MESSAGE: “Give What You Cannot Keep to Gain What You Cannot Lose”

Text: Mark 8:31-38

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to resist the easy and safe by surrendering to the guidance of Christ.

MEDITATION

Like Peter, we think we know how things should be. Certainly, we convince ourselves, suffering cannot be the way forward. Where is the value in that? So we dodge conflict, seek to keep everyone happy, try to shelter loved ones from pain. Before we know it, something has been lost, something precious, and we are not sure what it is or how to find it again. There is a way, but it requires letting Jesus take the wheel...

The two caskets lay end to end in the assembly room of the funeral home as Pastor Paul Stokes stood to speak. Double deaths had come to the Stokes family, but sadly, the deaths were not from old age. The occupants were teen-agers, brother and sister, who had died in an automobile accident.

Becky, Pastor Paul’s daughter, had arranged a birthday celebration for her brother, Paul, Jr., at their father’s church. After the celebration, Becky and her boyfriend Tommy accompanied Paul, Jr. to his local college to collect his girlfriend, Barbara. As they returned home, they crossed the causeway that traversed Little Pee Dee Swamp. There were no guardrails, so if a car veered off the highway, it would plunge into the swamp and quickly submerge. That is what happened to Paul’s car, and he and his sister died because of it.

Decisions. We make decisions every day, some inconsequential, some rather important. Fortunately, few of the decisions we make have tragic consequences like those made by Paul, Jr., Becky and their friends. But most of them have a ripple effect of some sort, and often we cannot see what lies beyond the next bend.

As I watched video footage from the extraordinary life and ministry of Billy Graham this past week, it was clear that one consequential *decision* was planted in the heart of all his preaching and evangelistic work: “How will you or I respond to Jesus’ call to follow him as a disciple?” For Graham, that question trumped all others one might encounter in life.

It resonates with the Wesleyan journey. We place great value on God’s sovereignty in calling us to faith by prevenient grace, that is, grace that prepares the human heart to be open towards God, but each of us makes a decision about whether we will open our heart to Jesus and follow him in discipleship. That decision was so consequential for Graham that he named his magazine, *Decision*, and his radio broadcast, *Hour of Decision*. At his massive

crusades held all over the globe, the measure of success was based on the number of 'Decisions for Christ' which were made.

Some decisions have enormous consequences or results. In the text which informs this message, Jesus makes a decision. To be candid, my past preaching on this passage has almost always emphasized Peter's role in the story. One moment, he speaks the wisdom of God by proclaiming Jesus as 'Son of God,' and in the next, he speaks words of the Temptor, trying to discourage Jesus from going to Jerusalem where he will be in grave danger.

We identify with Peter. We understand his motive for wanting to protect Jesus, whom he cares so deeply about. We sympathize with him when Jesus snaps, "Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts." But I wonder if we misinterpret the passion of Jesus' response. Could it be that Jesus' startling response arises not from disappointment or anger with Peter, but from his own internal struggle to do the right thing, the sacrificial thing, the redemptive thing, the God thing?

Jesus faced temptations before in the wilderness before his earthly ministry commenced. He will face temptation again in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he asks God to 'let the cup of suffering pass' from him. In this moment with Peter, Jesus is called upon to make a decision, a decision with consequential, sacrificial, tragic and *heroic* results. His incredible decision is summed up in his explanation to the disciples and crowd which follows: "All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of God's Kingdom will save them." His decision at this moment will take him to the cross, the grave and ultimately, the Easter resurrection. Our salvation hangs on the balance of his decision in this critical moment.

Everyone spends his or her life on something. Some spend it on vocational success or celebrity. Others give it over to financial security. Some spend it on relationships, good or bad. Others spend it on recreational pursuits. Jim Eliot, a missionary to the Auca natives of Ecuador, spent his life on bringing them the gospel. He was asked before attempting the evangelistic contact trip which would result in his murder why he would attempt such a thing. He responded, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose." He recognized the danger, but was willing to risk loss of life in order to bring gospel hope to those who would never hear it otherwise.

In our Tuesday morning Genesis class a couple of weeks ago, the question was asked of video participants whether they would prefer to be Cain or Abel in the biblical story we know from childhood. One panelist answered with certainty, "Definitely Cain! He is alive, and therefore eligible for redemption." But I wonder if I would respond with the same answer. Is a life without integrity better than a life lost with integrity whole? There are worse things than death.

I suspect the Resource Officer who did not enter the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School building during the recent shooting there is struggling with that very question. We may be tempted to point a finger at that Resource Officer and cry, ‘cowardice,’ but how can we be certain how we might react in such a moment of crisis. What decision would we make? And neither do we know the future. Is it not possible for the coward of today to become the hero of tomorrow?

“I’ll be like the coach who shielded students from harm with his own body,” we tell ourselves, but we cannot be 100% sure until we ourselves are faced with such an impossible decision. If we compromise our integrity in everyday, simple decisions, we predispose ourselves to cowardice when the stakes are high. Jesus chose to offer his life to the purposes of God, and we are here because he did so.

Which brings us back to Pastor Stokes as he stood over the caskets of his two beloved, teenage children. Everyone wondered what he would say, what anyone might say in such a heartbreaking moment. He reached to the roots of his faith and quoted the words of another father by the name of Job who lost his family, “The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Silence followed, but in it all who were present witnessed the strength and honesty of spirit which refused to curse fate or the God he loved so well. Those present knew the stuff from which Pastor Stokes and his wife were made and knew it was the stuff from which heroes were born.

The real hero of the day, Paul Stokes, Jr., lay in one of the caskets. Three youth emerged from the wreckage of the accident, for Paul and Tommy had kicked out the windshield of the car to gain freedom. But when Paul, Jr realized his sister was still trapped beneath, he made a decision to go back. He was a strong swimmer, trained in life-saving, so after three deep breaths, he dove for his beloved sister. He located the car, then the windshield, and found her in the back. He tried to free her, but it took too much time. He was later found with his arms around his sister in a life-saving hold. She had no water in her lungs, so it was likely that she had died before the car hit the water.

As a parent in grief, I’m sure Pastor Paul wished his son had not made the rescue attempt. But he had also given the boy a lifetime of lessons in moral responsibility. In a moment of critical decision, Paul, Jr., did what his heart and faith commanded. If the day ever comes when I am faced with such a decision, I hope I will have the courage to follow the example of heroes like Paul, Jr. and Jesus. But the truth is: every day, we have decisions to make, why not be heroic and follow Christ today?

