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Romans 12: 4-21

Matthew 16: 21-28

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Paul's letter to the Romans describes the way Christians should live in community with other Christian and within the secular world. It is, I believe, the way we, as Christians, seek to live out our lives in grateful response to the grace we have received in Christ. As Paul writes this letter, Paul is careful not to fall into the trap of setting up a bunch of rules to follow in order to gain salvation. Paul, a faithful Jew, grew up with rigid rules for righteousness, and knew the foolishness of trying to earn ones salvation. Instead of rules, Paul describes the Christian behavior as our spiritual worship, as our offering of gratitude and thanksgiving to God.

I think the Christian church has struggled throughout the centuries to find a balance between dramatic demands of discipleship with the understanding that our lives are offerings, feely given without rules and restrictions. One of the places I see the Presbyterian Church in particular, wrestle with this is in our confirmation curriculum. Years ago, before my time, confirmands were required to memorize the Westminster Catechism, 196 questions and answers concerning the Christian faith (some of you, no doubt, remember our own unique Presbyterian version of Chinese water torture). This method was effective in teaching the basic tenants of the Christian faith, but did not necessarily teach discipleship. Our curriculum has been modified many times since the days of the Westminster Catechism. Our current curriculum seeks to invite students to reflect on their baptism and on their new life in Christ. It's a good curriculum, but personally I have often questioned whether the curriculum challenges the student enough to really understand the radical demands of discipleship.

Most of the time, when I teach confirmation classes, the students are "typical" church kids. They have grown up in church with parents who go to church. But once, I had the opportunity to work with an entire group of kids who were relatively "unchurched", outside their experience with the youth here at Woodhaven, these kids had little exposure to the Christian community. One of the lessons in the confirmation curriculum is about putting on the "cloak of Christ," which talks about the new life we have in Christ and how that looks in our own lives. In this lesson, we looked at verses like the one we read in Romans today, verses with radical demands like bless those who curse you and overcoming evil with good, and suddenly one of the students burst out, "You're not serious? Nobody does this crap! It ain't natural!" I shared with her stories of people you and I know who actually do live like this, I even reminded her of experiences she had here in this church of people treating her with this kind of love and she came back at me saying, "Well, you don't expect me to do that, 'cause I can't, that's not how I work!" At that moment, I believe she was like Peter, who suddenly understood the radical demands of the gospel. At that very point, Jesus was asking

something of her that she could not give, not that she was unwilling, but that, she believed, she was unable.

I wonder if this girl's reaction was like those of the first readers of Paul's letter, "What? You can't be serious; no one can live this way!" And yet, they had seen and heard this demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ. And, this was in fact, the very life that Christ was calling them to follow.

Jesus calls his disciples to a radical new way of life. This call comes to us not only as individuals seeking to be faithful in our personal journey, but also corporately, as we together seek to be the body of Christ visible in the secular world. Jesus demands that we, the church, be a city set upon a hill, a light by which all can see God's grace and glory.

I can think of some outstanding times in church history when the Christian church has been a "city set on a hill." The Reformed Church in Germany immediately comes to mind during World War II as they stood in opposition to Hitler. Many churches in the old South also let their light shine in the darkness during the Civil War as they stood against slavery. In our own small way, I believe we let our own light shine in the darkness when two years ago we stood together in the North Lake Auditorium with Muslims and Jews and people of many faiths praying in many languages, but with one voice for peace.

Too often, however, it seems to me, unfortunately, that the only time we really get the opportunity to really stand in the spotlight these days is when the General Assembly meets and discusses controversial issues such as gay ordination and the occupation of Israel. When the General Assembly came to Fort Worth several years ago, I was sinfully proud. I was proud to see such a powerful Presbyterian presence in the very place where I had grown up. As a teenager I had always felt like the Presbyterian Church was largely invisible in light of so many large Baptist churches, so it was especially meaningful for me to have the larger church so visible here. Then, when I went to observe the Assembly, and I was embarrassed by all of the, what would you call them, lobbyist? I guess, who stood outside of the Assembly, advocating their point of view. I hated the way they were acting. I hate the way that they were the image the world saw of Presbyterians, not all the good things that were happening inside the Assembly, but all the bickering and fighting outside. Thus far, I'm not certain we have really been that strong and steady beam that illuminates the darkness, but it's not too late.

Once again this past summer the General Assembly dealt with issues of gay ordination. And, once again this spring, at our Presbytery meetings, we will be asked to vote on important items surrounding that issue. The Presbyterian Church has been wrestling with these issues for 30 years now, but I hope that this year's discussion and vote might somehow be different. It is clear to me after 30 years of debate, that Presbyterians are never going to agree on this issue, so uniformity is not my prayer for this round of discussion and debate. My prayer is that we may somehow, some way find a way to discuss this difficult and emotional topic with love, understanding and respect for people on all sides of the issue. My prayer is that when the spotlight

shines once again on the Presbyterians discussing gay ordination, that the world might see a church that is unified in seeking God's will for itself, unified in seeking to understand not only the issues, but also the people involved, unified in its love for God and one another rather than its love for being right. I know, it ain't natural, and it ain't easy, but that's the radical demand of the gospel. I wonder if the way of the cross in this particular issue is to sacrifice our need to win. I honestly don't know, but I would sure hate for my desire to make Jesus over into my image to become a stumbling block for Christ in the world.

So how do we do this? Well, I'll tell you what I told the girl in my confirmation class. We look at Christ and we try to imitate him in our lives. We ask not what would Jesus do, but what does Jesus want us to do? We try, sometimes we fail, we seek God's forgiveness and we try again. But the most important part of living the Christian life is that we recognize that in reality it ain't natural, and it's not something we can do on our own, to live as faithful Christians requires complete and total dependence on Christ.