

30 August 2020: Matthew 16:21-28 (Proper 17)

Have you ever been in a house of mirrors? There were such things at county fairs when I was a kid. The first mirrors encountered were those that distorted your image: you would see yourself but one mirror would make you look short and ridiculously round; in another your reflection would be impossibly tall and skinny; another would make your head look huge and your body tiny. Next was the mirror maze: it was ‘crazy-making’ trying to find your way out. A house of mirrors is about the distortion of reality. The truth is every mirror distorts. When at home, brushing teeth or putting on makeup, what you see in your mirror is not you. You see a reverse image of yourself, a false reality. Jesus came to smash all the distortions, the lies, the crazy-making view of humanity and our assumptions about God.

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

Jesus show us what we assume to be reality is not. We can get all bent round and twisted, lost if we invest in the false images, values, and assumptions with which we are surrounded. The world says a person is valuable when they produce material success, prestige, and power, when they serve some purpose or at least cause no inconvenience. Otherwise, any life is disposable. Jesus says the greatest in God’s kingdom are child-like, powerless, poor, the ones desperate for forgiveness; the humble and meek; the “throwaways.” Jesus says if you try to save yourself you are lost; if you lose yourself in Him you are saved.

The Bible teaches holiness matters, not what we accumulate or produce or what others think of us. Paul gives us a picture of what holiness looks like: genuine love, holding fast to good, mutual affection; showing honor to all; zeal, serving; joy, patience, perseverance, prayer, generosity, hospitality; blessing, not cursing; empathy with the lowly, seeking peace with all; humility; self-deprecation; living peaceably, leaving retribution to God. We are held accountable by God for this standard of living.

Why does Jesus call us to a seemingly impossible standard of living? It is simply a principle of the universe that we become what we love. If we love the pursuit of possessions greed will sooner or later color and change everything in our lives. If human approval is the guiding force of our lives, we become tyrannical or co-dependent, or both. If ruled by selfishness, others exist for our use or our disposable. If we treasure unresolved anger, we become raging, hurtful people, ruining every relationship. Such are examples.

God yearns to love us and be loved by us. God at work *in* us will be our joy because we become more able to know the reality of God’s love first-hand. God at work *through* us will be our joy, seeing God at work in the lives of others, as we support and walk with them.

Following Jesus is full of ironies. We must learn new ways of thinking and acting. It begins and is sustained by a desire for God’s truth and a desire for true human freedom. To deeply accept God’s love and be empowered to share God’s love, we must abandon our distorted thinking and actions. We are to carry our desire for God and our desire to live a life worthy of God into each relationship and encounter and when we are alone. Such desire will positively influence our interactions: what we see, think, and feel. It takes practice, but we will soon learn how radically free we are as God’s children: we need not be bound up with past hurts, we need not project our fears or anger onto others; we need not be shackled by grudge and resentment; we need not blame our troubles on others. Jesus promises us a new and better life of joy and freedom.

I offer a simple prayer every day, many times a day, and I commend it to you:

O God, without you I cannot; without me you will not.

I pray that you will be with me and work with me today that I may better know your will.

Deliver me from the bondage of self that I may better do your will.

Take away my difficulties (my distorted thoughts and actions) that your victory over them may be a sign to those whom I would help of your power, your love, and your way of life.

Not my will, but your will be done in me today, Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.