

Listen to Him!
Luke 9:18-36
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First Central Congregational UCC
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After all the stories of healings, exorcisms, and other miracles given to this point in the Gospel of Luke, the people are left puzzling “Who is this Jesus?” That’s where today’s stories pick up.

[Read Gospel]

Our communion hymn today is one of the oldest hymns we sing. “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” was composed in the fourth century as part of the Divine Liturgy of Saint James—the liturgy of the Syriac and Indian Orthodox Churches. That knowledge always excites me a little when we do sing this hymn—Christians have been singing “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” for seventeen centuries, and mostly Asian Christians.

The hymn was likely composed in Greek in the city of Jerusalem. Tradition held that the song was written by James, the brother of Jesus, but scholars think the song more likely comes from four centuries later.

In the 19th century a movement arose in England seeking a return to ancient sources of Christian worship. So, in 1864 the Anglican priest Gerard Moultrie translated this hymn from Greek into the English text we are familiar with. Then, in 1906 the great composer Ralph Vaughn Williams paired the words with this tune Picardy, which is a French folk song. All of that I also find interesting—a fourth century Greek hymn, sung historically by Syrians and Indians, becomes an Episcopal hymn set to a French folk song and now we sing the hymn on the Great Plains of North America in the 21st century.

In the Divine Liturgy of St. James “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” is sung as the Eucharistic elements are brought forward. The hymn conveys a sense of majesty, awe, and wonder. Maybe even the sublime. Yet the lyrics move from the heavenly throne room into ordinary earthly things – a teenage girl’s womb, the body of an infant, blood, bread and wine.

The hymn invites us into divine power and glory, by reminding us of the incarnation. That God became one of us. That God can appear in ordinary things like the food we eat. That we too are the presence of God. A fine hymn for Transfiguration Sunday.

Luke Timothy Johnson writes, “The Word of God demands . . . a ‘turning’ of one’s life.” We are called to change our behavior in imitation of God.

A few weeks ago when we explored the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness I said that Jesus is tempted with “the hopes, dreams, fears, and desires of all people,” quoting theologian Willie James Jennings. Precisely he is tempted with self-sufficiency, authority, and the need to be safe and secure. The point of the temptations story was to make us aware that

we could defeat these fears and enter into a new humanity. We can't be self-sufficient—we must learn to rely upon other people. We can't hold all the power, our vision is not the only one—we must share and work with others in a network of mutuality. And we cannot secure ourselves by walling ourselves off from people who are different from us. We must be vulnerable and open to the rich blessings of a diverse community.

Jesus is God's agent of salvation pointing to these new possibilities and inviting us to follow, which is why the voice of God says "Listen to Him!" We are to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus in this new way because Jesus is the Messiah of God.

What does Jesus mean, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

Let's begin with what the cross is not.

The beautiful hymn "Be Still My Soul" is quite wrong when it says "bear patiently the cross of grief or pain."

The cross is not your personal burden. Aunt Myrtle might say of her rheumatism, "It's my cross to bear," but Aunt Myrtle is wrong. The cross as presented in the New Testament is not that.

I fully understand how for Aunt Myrtle viewing her rheumatism as her cross can be a helpful metaphor. Or for any number of people, viewing their personal burden as their cross to bear can give them comfort and courage. But that sort of piety is not what Jesus has in mind here in Luke chapter 9.

Also, carrying one's cross does not mean suffering silently at the hands of an abuser or oppressor. That misinterpretation has long been used to keep women, minorities, and the poor from claiming their rights and privileges. Jesus' cross is definitely not that.

In order to explain what Jesus does mean, I need to tell you a story.

My favorite theologian is the Baptist James McClendon. McClendon wrote a little book entitled *Biography as Theology* in which he explores the doctrine of the cross. McClendon thinks a teaching like this is only relevant to us if the teaching still has an effect on contemporary lives. Which means he isn't interested in the stories of Jesus if they are merely an historical artefact. He is interested in the stories of Jesus if those stories continue to change people's lives and change the world. If the stories aren't effective and relevant, then they are merely curiosities of a bygone age. So, does the story of the cross has any relevance or effectiveness for the contemporary world? Or, you can ask "Do lives that listen to Jesus and take up the cross daily work?"

McClendon thinks they do and in that little book he points to four lives—the composer Charles Ives, the diplomat Dag Hammarskjold, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Clarence Jordan.

Now Clarence Jordan is not a household name unless you were a liberal Baptist in the South. In 1942 Clarence Jordan and his wife and one other couple established Koinonia Farm outside Americus, Georgia. The word *koinonia* is Greek for communion. The goal of the farm was to create an interracial community in the midst of Southern segregation. According to the Wikipedia article, "The Koinonia partners bound themselves to the equality of all persons, rejection of violence, ecological stewardship, and common ownership of possessions."

As the Civil Rights Movement grew and developed, Koinonia Farm's way of life was perceived as a threat by its neighbors precisely because the farm demonstrated a way of life that worked and was contrary to Jim Crow.

Now, all of that was set up for my story. Here's the story, as recounted by Jim McClendon:

In the early fifties, it is told, Clarence approached his brother Robert Jordan, later a state senator and justice of the George Supreme Court, asking him to represent Koinonia Farm legally.

"Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got."

"We might lose everything too, Bob."

"It's different for you."

"Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' And I said, 'Yes.' What did you say?"

"I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point."

"Could that point by any chance be—the cross?"

"That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not *on* the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified."

"Then I don't believe you're a disciple. You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you're an admirer not a disciple."

"Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn't *have* a church, would we?"

"The question," Clarence said, "is, 'Do you have a church?'"

Robert Jordan was true to his word. Later in his political career he defended segregation.

Whereas Clarence Jordan affirmatively answers the question about the relevance of this story for contemporary life while at the same time answering our question—what Jesus means when he invites us to take up our crosses daily and follow him.

A common theme of the great spiritual and philosophical teachings of this world is ridding ourselves of the control of the self. Our ego is the source of anxiety, hatred, violence, etc. The path to goodness is the path of "unselfing."

Last semester in my Ethics class at Creighton University I concluded the semester with an essay written by the British novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch in which she writes that the humble person is the one most likely to become good because the humble person has learned to see things as they are. But how has the humble person learned this? Murdoch says that beauty is the answer.

People who care for potted plants or go bird-watching are learning the virtues, according to Murdoch. She says such people would probably be surprised that their enjoyable

habit has anything to do with morality, but the surprise is one reason the habit is moral. Such habits draw us outside ourselves. But the kind of beauty she is most interested in is art. She writes, “the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue.”

Last semester I surprised my students on the penultimate day of Ethics class by breaking them into groups and passing out to them a wide selection of paintings. I then instructed them to discover what was good in each of the paintings.

To enjoy a great painting one usually must sit silently before the canvas. Which is one reason no one can enjoy the *Mona Lisa* anymore. The crowds and illegal camera flashes prevent any quiet sitting. When in Florence at the Uffizi Gallery in 2011 I sat before Caravaggio’s *Sacrifice of Isaac* for at least twenty minutes.

And so this may not be Iris Murdoch’s point, for she was an atheist, but I find a parallel with the wisdom of the stories we read today. The life of discipleship—of taking up our crosses daily and following Jesus—begins in listening. Did you notice that the story begins with Jesus praying alone, continues with Jesus taking the disciples up on the mountain to pray, and concludes with them keeping silent?

The Syrian monk Isaac of Nineveh wrote, “If you love truth, be a lover of silence. Silence like the sunlight will illuminate you in God and will deliver you from the phantoms of ignorance. Silence will unite you to God.”

So, the way to overcome our fears begins with prayer, with silence, with listening.