

“A Bumpy Ride”

Rev. Eric. S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

September 3, 2017

[Matthew 16:21-27](#)

Do you know anyone who you might call an *aggressive* driver? Now, I know that’s going to be a subjective matter. It’s all relative to your own driving, I suppose. I’ll give you two examples from my family. My mother is – let’s see, how can I put this? – a very cautious driver. On the other hand, when my grandmother was alive, she seemed to not be aware that there were speed limits, at all. And so, my mother, of course, thought my grandmother drove more than a bit recklessly. Do you know anyone like that? Someone who always drives like their wife is in the last stages of labor and they must get to the hospital immediately, even when there is no rush at all? Do you know anyone like that? Or, worse still, have you ever tried to follow someone like that? It’s happened to me. Trying to follow someone to a location unknown to you, while your leader doesn’t slow down for turns and seems to think yellow lights mean *gun it* – it can be pretty scary.

There’s a twist on the old “What Would Jesus Do” line – it’s “What Would Jesus Drive?” Several years ago, there was a whole campaign around that question, trying to get Christians to drive more fuel-efficient cars. I’m not sure what Jesus would drive, but I have an idea *how* He’d drive. I think if we were in the car behind Jesus, we’d be hanging on for the ride of our lives.

Jesus tells His disciples in today’s gospel lesson: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” It seems pretty simple – “follow me,” but it turns out to be quite a bumpy ride. Just ask Peter.

Last week, we talked about how Simon became Peter. Jesus asked His disciples who others said that Jesus was, and then He asked them, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Simon got it

right. He said “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And because of that answer, Jesus changed Simon’s name to Peter or *Petros* or “Rock.” Jesus even told Peter that He was going to build His church on this rock. What a great moment for Simon Peter! What a wonderful transformation! It makes you want to turn the page and see what’s next for Peter. Surely, God has wonderful things in store for this guy.

And so, here we are this week, with the verses that follow, with “the rest of the story,” as Paul Harvey used to say. This week, we pick up where we left off last week. What does God have in store for Peter? Ooohhhh...Jesus says “get behind me, Satan” to him. Yeah, it’s gonna be a bumpy ride. Peter goes from Rock to Satan, from being handed the keys of the kingdom to being called a stumbling block to Jesus.

Why is this? What happened? It seems Peter was not ready for the bumpy road ahead of Jesus and ahead of himself. He wasn’t ready for the curves and the speed of following Jesus. Jesus told the disciples that He must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Peter objects, and really it’s hard to blame him. Peter says “no, Jesus, that’s not how it’s going to be.” The Messiah, the son of the Living God – suffering and dying? What a ridiculous idea! Peter thinks that Jesus is momentarily confused, and so he, Peter the Rock, must step in to straighten Jesus out. I’m sure he was more than a little surprised when Jesus said “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” But he *was*. Peter had this Messiah thing figured out for Jesus, and Peter wasn’t the only one. So many wanted a political messiah, an earthly king who would overtake the Roman oppressors. But that wasn’t the king that Jesus came to be. That was thinking only of “human things.”

So Jesus had to straighten them all out. He told them that following Him was the important thing, and that following Him was going to be a bumpy ride. Following Jesus is going to mean giving up their ideas of how things are supposed to be and doing the hard things that Jesus

asks. Yes, following Jesus is going to be about, as Jesus says, “denying” ourselves. And that sounds like no fun at all.

And I’m not going to lie to you – being a Christian, being a Jesus follower, does involve self-denial. If you are going to do what Jesus said and help others in need, you can’t have spent all of your money on yourself. If you are going to honor Jesus by spending time in worship with your church community, you can’t be sleeping in or out shopping. If you are going to put God first in your life, then *you* can’t be the only thing you ever think about. So, yes, there is self-denial. Jesus said we must deny ourselves.

But self-denial alone won’t do it. You can sit in a bare room and remove all other influences – no TV, no computer, no food, no drink. You can sit there until you nearly starve to death, and that alone won’t get you the least bit closer to Jesus. Self-denial alone won’t make you a disciple of Jesus. What will? That other part Jesus said. The part that’s really the important thing for us to focus on. Jesus said “follow me.” And that’s where we get going on that bumpy ride.

There has to be something more, and there *was* more to Jesus’ command. First, He said we must deny ourselves, and then He said we must take up our crosses. Honestly, that doesn’t sound like much fun, either.

In August of 2003, the Church of the Holy Cross in New York City was broken into twice. In the first event, thieves made away with a metal moneybox. Three weeks later, vandals escaped with something much more puzzling. Being a Catholic church, there was a large crucifix in the church. The thieves had unbolted the 4-foot long, 200-pound plaster Jesus from the crucifix, but left behind the wooden cross to which it was attached.

The church caretaker, David St. James, confessed his bewilderment at this. “They just decided, ‘We’re going to leave the cross and take Jesus,’” he said. “We don’t know why they took just him. We figure if you want the crucifix, you take the whole crucifix.”¹

I’m not really sure why the thieves did that, but I think it might have something to say to us. All of us at times would like to have Jesus and leave his cross behind. Jesus represents forgiveness and grace. Jesus is a divine friend who accepts us as we are, hears our prayers and helps us in times of need. Who wouldn’t want Jesus? But his cross, on the other hand, represents discipline and self-denial. The cross represents service and sacrifice. The cross represents taking our eyes off of ourselves and putting them on those for whom Christ died. That’s an entirely different matter altogether. We want Jesus; we’re not so sure about taking up His cross. *The Message* paraphrase puts it like this: “Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way...” Jesus set his path toward Jerusalem, toward the very people who would condemn Him to death. He could have stayed out in the rural areas, preaching and healing, and He might have been left alone. But Jesus knew that there was more to His mission than playing it safe. He says to all of us that we, too, must pick up our crosses. We head into the battle, rather than running away. We are not called to lives of safety. We are called to lives of putting ourselves on the line for the kingdom.

But we don’t just pick up our cross and head out in any direction. The third part to Jesus’ command was “follow me.” We must follow where He leads. One of the places that we follow Jesus is into this sanctuary on Sunday mornings. We come here in worship and praise of the God who has given us everything and who promises us eternal life. And yet we often turn worship into a time of arduous self-denial. How many parents have told their children “I don’t care if you want to

¹ Andrea Elliott, “Thieves Take Figure of Jesus, but Not the Cross,” *New York Times* (8-25-03). Cited by Greg Asimakoupoulos in *Leadership*.

go or not, it's Sunday morning, and we're going to go to church"? How many of us have looked in the mirror and told ourselves that?

If we're honest, we'll admit that we've all felt that way sometimes. We've turned worship of the one, true, living God into something to dread! "Oh, no, it's Sunday morning again, got to go to church." We are supposed to be here in worship and praise of God! We are here to celebrate, not to pass the time as if we were in detention. No, *this* is not the self-denial part. This should be time we look forward to. It should be time of renewal to get back on the journey. Yes, we follow Jesus here, but this is not where the road ends. Being here does not make us Christians. There's a one-liner that says "sitting in church doesn't make you a Christian any more than sitting in a garage makes you a car." Yes, it's a step on the journey. It's an important part of our week – to worship, celebrate, and learn, but it is not the end of the journey.

To be disciples, we have to go out those doors and keep following Jesus. And then we get going on that bumpy ride. We follow Jesus and we find ourselves taking care of the sick. We follow Jesus and we find ourselves feeding the hungry. We follow Jesus and we find ourselves visiting the imprisoned. We follow Jesus and we find ourselves reaching out to those who have been shunned by this world. We follow Jesus and we find ourselves speaking up for those who have no voice. We follow Jesus and we find ourselves seeking out the lost who have never heard the good news. We follow Jesus and we find ourselves in uncomfortable places, far away from our TVs and La-Z-Boys. We find ourselves in the presence of people who are in need of clothing, food, and water, among those for whom those needs are literal and those for whom those needs are spiritual. We follow Jesus, and it's a bumpy ride.

And following Jesus makes us set aside things we might rather do. We might have to miss watching that favorite TV show if we are out giving food to a person who hasn't eaten in a couple days. We might have to skip that party if we are talking with someone about the freedom and love

found in Christ. We might not be able to buy the latest luxuries if we've given that money for God to use through the ministries of this church. Yes, there's going to be self-denial. There's going to be taking up our cross.

But there's going to be joy. If you've never experienced the joy of serving others, you don't know what you have missed. How many times have we heard the stories of people going on mission trips, thinking they are going to serve others, and finding that they are the ones blessed? Some of the best times of my life have been times spent in service to others. There is joy in serving others, for God made us to serve. God made us for self-denial. Don't believe it? Think of the stories of unhappy wealthy people. Think of those who hide inside their mansions, indulging only themselves. How often do we hear such lines as "money can't buy you happiness" or of lottery winners who end up depressed?

So, while there will be self-denial, it's really denying ourselves the things that won't bring us happiness anyway. It's really less about denying ourselves, and more about what we gain in following Jesus on the bumpy ride. It's about following behind Jesus, tires squealing, barely slowing down around the corners, and hanging on for the time of our lives. Enjoy the ride! Amen