

## **“The Christian Paradox: Dying in Order to Live”**

Date: March 21, 2021

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34 John 12:20-33

Occasion: Lent 5, Year B

Themes: Cross-life;

*Webster’s Dictionary* defines the word “paradox” as follows: “A statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet it is perhaps true.” (read it again) Now, listen to these words of Jesus which we heard in the gospel lesson today: “He who loves his life will lose it and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Sounds like a paradox to me. Most of us have been taught that we should *love* ourselves, not *hate* ourselves. While it is true that some people have low self-esteem, it is also true that far too many people, perhaps most people, are ego-centric, self-centered if you will. Even if a person has a low self-esteem, they are still preoccupied thinking about themselves.

I would remind us all that the central letter of the word sin is the letter “I.” The center of sin is “I.” It’s an unhealthy desire to have the world operate according to *my* values and *my* standards. We even define a perfect day as one in which everything goes *MY* way. The perfect life, we think, is getting and having everything we want.

But Jesus tells us: there is another way to be happy, and it’s not by living only for yourself; it’s living for others. Jesus is suggesting that self-denial actually leads to eternal life. It means thinking a little less of me and a little more of others. Therefore, a better definition of humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of you less often.

For Jesus, true life is found in sacrificial living. These were not just idle words for Jesus, he practiced what he preached and he died to prove his point. And God restored his life, to show the world he spoke the truth.

And so, the cross is the way to life; it is both our salvation and the new standard by which we are to live. The cross is our salvation; that is why it hangs at the center of our sanctuary. The cross is our road back home to our Heavenly Father. Or, to use another metaphor, the cross is the instrument and the man who hung on it is the surgeon; together they transplant new hearts into dead souls.

In the intensive care units of our hospitals are heart monitors. When a person has a heart attack it registers a very irregular pattern and when life stops, the line goes flat, indicating the person is dead. When a person is dead in their sins, the spiritual monitor registers a straight line, indicating that person has stopped responding to the will of God. Nothing less than a heart transplant will cure the patient.

This is what the psalmist meant when he prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, o God, and put a new and right spirit within me." King David, who wrote that psalm, knew that he had sinned; and he knew that he could not save himself. Only God could perform the necessary heart surgery to deal with the condition of his heart.

Friends, we cannot forgive ourselves; we cannot restore that broken relationship with God. No matter how much good we try to do to make up for the wrong in our life, the sin goes much deeper than we can reach. Only spiritual surgery which cuts at the very roots of sin will get at the core of our problem – our sinful nature.

On the cross, Jesus Christ died so that we might have new hearts, spiritual hearts that beat and throb and pulse with the love of God. It is truly a spiritual miracle. Only God can do it.

Jeremiah the prophet foretold this new thing. He said, "Behold, the days are coming when God will make a new covenant, not like the old

covenant. I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts.” Once again we hear this theme of the heart. In biblical times, the heart stood for the mind and soul and will of a person.

So what was Jeremiah saying? Simply this - that there would come a day when people would stop trying to live by rules and regulations; they would know what is pleasing to God in their hearts. Do you see it? In Jesus Christ we have seen what is pleasing to God. Jesus was perfect, obedient to God even to the point of death.

When we confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior, he comes into our hearts, into our mind or soul if you will. This new obedience, which Jeremiah spoke of, springs from our relationship with the Risen Christ. No longer following external rules and regulations, Jesus guides our daily choices. The law of love is written on our hearts.

The only heart specialist in the world who can operate on hearts damaged by the sickness of sin, is the Divine Physician, Jesus Christ. Only he can take hearts of stone and make them into hearts of flesh that beat and pulse with new life.

And here’s where the paradox comes into play – in order to live we only have to die; die that is to our old, sinful self and allow the new creation, the new person, to come forth. In Galatians 2:20, Paul says: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

In order to live, I only have to die; die that is to the unhealthy love of self which I spoke about earlier. Die to that unhealthy desire to live only by my selfish standards. Die to that conceited attitude which sees the world through my eyes. Die to sin and live in Christ.

Only I can't do that; only God can. It requires a new heart, a virtual transplant. God, in Christ, comes into our life and we become a whole new person. That's what Jesus meant when he said to hate ourselves. We should hate that part of self which continues to sin and rebel against God.

Instead, we should love the new life which God creates, the one which emerges when we surrender our will to His. There is this one line in the Lord's Prayer which I think would help us to surrender our will to his. It simply says, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven."

I wonder how our lives would change if that became a regular part of our prayer life. As soon as we get up in the morning; when we put our clothes on; when we interact with our family members; when we go about doing our business for the day. Praying, "Thy will be done."

How would the world be different if we changed the focus from "What do I want?" to "What does God want?" It is in surrendering our will to God's will that we die to our old self and we become reborn – by seeking to do God's will.

"Thy will be done." Such a short prayer and yet so powerful. It is *this* prayer which allows the Divine heart surgeon to do the radical surgery on our heart which needs to be done, so that we can be reborn, so that we can have real and everlasting life. The Christian paradox is this – in order to live, we simply need to die. Let us pray:

"God, we praise you for our death to self, death to sin. God help us to live the crucified life. Help us to die daily just as Jesus called us to, to deny ourselves daily, to die to ourselves and to our sinful tendencies. Lord, we want to live in you, and we want you to live in us. Jesus, we want your life to be our life. May your will, not ours be done. Amen."