

TWO GOSPELS
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Matthew 16:21-28

There are two gospels. That may come as something of a surprise, since we know only the one gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. That is the gospel we have come to hear today. That is the gospel that is presented in its most challenging form in Jesus' words to us: "If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will find them."

Let us be sure we understand: If we want to save our lives, the result will be just the opposite: we will lose our lives. If we lose our lives for Jesus, we will find that our lives are saved. That is the gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But there is not one gospel, but two. There is another gospel, and we are familiar with it, as well. It is the gospel that we hear outside of this place, and it goes like this: "Don't deny yourself anything, but take up the latest thing you want (you've got MasterCard, after all), and follow your own desires. If you want to save your life, then exercise and eat right and take your multi-vitamin and your life will be saved."

There are two gospels. One is about Jesus, and one is centered on ourselves. We hear them both.

In this passage in Matthew, Jesus was very clear about where this gospel leads. He told how "he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." And Peter didn't like it. Peter, you see, also knew this other gospel, the one that says look out for yourself, the one that proclaims that you got to go along to get along, the one that says don't make waves.

So when Jesus spoke of going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, it just didn't compute for Peter. "God forbid, Lord, this must never happen to you!" Peter had a gospel in mind, but it surely wasn't the gospel that Jesus proclaimed. Peter's gospel went something like this: Yes, you go to Jerusalem, but instead of suffering at the hands of the scribes and others, you gather an army of supporters. Instead of submitting to their will, you fight for your will. Instead of being killed, you kill those who oppose you. That's what Peter had in mind.

In fact, the way of Jesus sounded, well, foolish. Crucifixion? Never! The Romans used crucifixion to keep people in line. The Roman world was a world studded with crosses with human bodies nailed upon them. Sometimes after a revolt or rebellion, Roman emperors would order an entire highway to be lined with crosses and their human burdens. That would be a pretty clear message to anybody who thought of rising up against Rome. The cross was not just an instrument of death to those who hung on them. It was also an instrument of intimidation to everybody else. The message was: If you don't want to end up here, then you'd better behave.

So when Jesus suggested death and taking up a cross, Peter was aghast. The whole point of survival in Roman society was to avoid the cross. And isn't that the point of life—to survive, to hang on, to do it to them before they do it to you? That's the gospel, the other gospel, the gospel of this world. Simon Peter lived by that gospel, and much of the time we do, too.

The gospel of Jesus Christ has its scripture, and we call it the Bible. That's what we do each week when we assemble here. We gather around this ancient book. It is the Bible that is put on this pulpit, not the Wall St. Journal and not Time Magazine and not even Shakespeare or some other great work of literature. We gather around this book, preacher and people, because we say that these are words of life. The ancient words of this old book are my relevant and immediate than the words of this morning's newspaper. That is how central this gospel is to us.

But there are two gospels, and that other gospel also has its scriptures. It is the advertising in magazines and on TV that tell us that we're worth it, so take care of yourself and do for yourself and get what you want for yourself.

I went over to the library this week to survey some magazines, the scriptures of this world. Here are what the scriptures say:

Jesus says: “If you would save your life you will lose it.” The scriptures of this world say, as one shampoo ad put it: “It’s all about the hair.”

Jesus asks: “What does it profit if you gain the whole world but lose your life?” The scriptures of this world anxiously ask: “Is there a bear in your portfolio?”

While Jesus speaks of giving your life to follow him, the scriptures of this world say: “Imagine your life in a Viking kitchen.”

There are two gospels: the gospel of this world and the gospel of Jesus Christ. And the truth is that we try to live by both. We want to follow Jesus Christ, but we also want the latest gadget. We want the courage of Christ, but we also want a strongly positioned investment portfolio. We want to take up our cross and follow our Lord, but we also want to protect our lives by getting regular check-ups and eating our broccoli. I’ve heard one of our missionaries say that one way you can tell the Americans who have come to this foreign country on a mission trip is that they all have three or four kinds of hand sanitizer with them, and the locals stand around wondering what this stuff is that the foreigners are constantly putting on their hands.

There are two gospels, and we live by both—the way of Jesus and the way of the world, the way of following where he leads and the way of going where we want, the way of giving our lives for his sake, and the way of saving our lives at all costs.

And yet, I suspect that in our most honest moments we know that only one of these gospels finally gives life. The latest toy is soon replaced by another toy that is newer, faster, cooler; and the one we have, that looked so glamorous last week, now looks so Last Week so that it doesn’t satisfy anymore. The efforts we make to save our lives are ultimately doomed to failure. All of us will come to the end of our earthly lives. As I heard a speaker say one time: “No one lives forever, and I don’t suppose that God will make an exception in my case.” If we make a god out of our physical survival, we will all finally be disappointed.

Besides, that other gospel, that earthly gospel, leads to anxiety, anger, and fear. Anxiety: I’ve got to stay ahead or everyone else will pass me . . . I’ve got to do for myself, or else nobody will . . . Anger: Who does he think he is, taking advantage of me like that? And fear: What happens if the terrorists strike, if the housing market doesn’t rebound, if my kids don’t make the grade? When it’s all up to us, that is where we are left.

I suspect we know that. And so finally, after all other ways have been tried, we turn again to Jesus. Here is his proposition: “Those who want to save their lives will lose

them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will save them.” I don’t have to save myself. You don’t have to live for yourself. You can relax. Your life is in God’s hands, and the promises of God are sure. I can dare to live for Christ, to take up my cross, however we understand that, and follow to the strange and surprising places where he leads.

There are two gospels: One appears to be full of life and fun. Turn on the TV and see how it is so. Drink this soft drink, drive this car, attend this school, and all will be well. We know it is not so.

The other gospel seems to be headed for suffering and death. That’s what it looked like to Peter. But Peter didn’t pay attention to all the words of Jesus, how he would suffer, and die, and on the third day rise. This way of Jesus that appears to be such a dead end is actually the way to life.

Two gospels, two totally different ways of life, two different directions for you to go. Which one will you choose?✠