



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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May 28, 2017 Sermon

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## More Than Self

Proverbs 1:20-33 *The Message Bible*, Mark 8:27-38 NRSV

It's Memorial Day Weekend! Didn't anyone tell you? What are you doing here in church? Just think, if you weren't here you could be well on your way to or already at the lake, the beach, or a backyard barbecue warming up for a game of Corn Hole. Or you could have decided to take the Sunday off, sleep in, stay home and chill: Spend quality time on FaceBook and Instagram, catch up with all your online friends everywhere. Oh, yes....I guess some of you could be actually doing that here, right now. Moving right along.

When you think about Memorial Day weekend, where does *your* mind go? The official beginning of summer? Swimming pools opening! School's out! Vacation begins! Go shopping! Take advantage of deep holiday discounts. Grill out! Lift a glass! Celebrate! It's the beginning of "Summer time and the livin' is easy." All true. And indeed, delightful. Of course, that's not the core of it.

Back in 1868, General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic ordered that the 30<sup>th</sup> day of May would be designated as "Decoration Day" to decorate the graves of those who died in defense of their country during the Civil War. The war that threatened to tear apart and end our Republic as we know it. By the grace of God and the victory of the Union army we remained the United States of America. However, it wasn't until after World War I, and the holiday was broadened to encompass the honoring of Americans who died fighting in any war, that the Southern states of the former confederacy began to acknowledge Memorial Day with the rest of the country. And it wasn't until just this past week that confederate monuments (and not without conflict) were at last removed from the public square in New Orleans. The fight for the soul of our nation, "one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all," continues.

I started with what may seem more like a history lesson than a sermon, because I believe that Jesus has a word for us we need to hear on this Memorial Day weekend. I believe that Jesus has an invitation for each of us, who truly from the bottom of our hearts "want to be a Christian" (as we just sang) *and* who are also blessed to be citizens of the USA. I hear Jesus calling us to reset our minds, like he told Peter to do: to reset our minds from human things to divine things. Jesus spells it out for Peter and the crowd quite plainly. It is a path that we may not like at first. It is a path that will not let us look away from the pain of the world. It is a path that leads us into the eye of the storm. Jesus' way of love is counterintuitive. It disconcerts and disrupts everyone—Even Jesus, as he faced what lay ahead for him in Jerusalem.

Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane according to Mark, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want," (Mark 14:36) reveals his internal turmoil: Jesus did not *want* his life to end that way. We can hear Jesus praying a "decentering prayer" right there in the Garden. Agitated and distressed, Mark tells us that he prayed this fervent prayer just moments before he was arrested. I hear the first evidence of Jesus' internal struggle in today's story, in Jesus' sharp rebuke to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but human things." (Mark 8:33). It suggests that Jesus whose human mind knew first hand about human thoughts, was tempted to choose a different path.

Maybe because of Peter's A+ answer to the question, "Who do you say that I am" he felt emboldened enough to rebuke Jesus in the heat of that moment. Peter did not like, did not understand this trajectory of suffering, rejection, and death that Jesus just laid out for them. "What? That's crazy talk. You are the Messiah who just multiplied a few loaves of bread to feed 5,000 people one day and then turned around and did it again for another 4,000 people. What's this suffering and rejection talk? You are the Messiah who does miraculous healings! You are the Messiah who silences the best teachers with your astounding new teachings, that's the Messiah I was confessing. Not the one that's going to go down suffering and humiliated. You could be any kind of Messiah you want to be. Come on: Be the politically powerful empire take-over kind of Messiah! Why on earth would You, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, *choose* the path of humility: suffering, rejection and death—as the only way to resurrection and victory?"

I don't think Peter was the only one that day on the way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, who did not like, did not understand, Jesus' prediction of his path forward. Nor is Peter the only one in our sanctuary today who does not like, does not understand, the path that Jesus chose: A life of "downward mobility ending on the cross?"<sup>1</sup> A choice to lose one's life for the sake of the gospel? Can this be the only path that leads to resurrection?

What do Jesus' words to Peter have to do with Memorial Day today? I believe the soul of our country, for which countless courageous men and women have sacrificed their lives in the line of duty; and the salvation of our individual souls depend upon *our* response, our obedience to Jesus' clear command in Mark 8:34. Here it is again: "If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Just two days ago in Portland, Oregon on an eastbound MAX train, three men did exactly this to defend two teenage girls who appeared to be Muslim, when another passenger began "ranting and raving" and shouting anti-Muslim hate speech at them. According to witnesses, a white male passenger began yelling what "would best be characterized as hate speech toward a variety of ethnicities and religions." The slurs were directed at these two female passengers, one of whom was wearing a hijab, according to police. Two of the men died from stab wounds and the third was seriously injured in their attempt to deescalate and stand against this man's hate rant. The battle against hate continues. On this Memorial Day, let us remember the courage of these men in the line of fire, defending the soul of our nation. Two of them literally lost their lives for the sake of the gospel of Divine Love. Indeed they will be saved according to Jesus' promise.

Most of us are not called to take up this kind of cross. Jesus' command to take up *your* cross means something different for each of us. However the turn to which we are all called can be summed up in one word. It's really the only word you need to remember from this sermon. The one word is **decentering**. That's right, making room for Jesus in the center; keeping the center clear for God in Christ. If Christ is in the center then we are not. Decentering is the path that leads to the healing path of salvation for each of us and for all of us. It was the hard lesson that Job learned through suffering and near death. It was the hard lesson that caused the man known as the "rich, young ruler," to turn away from Jesus (Mark 10:17, Matt. 19:20, Luke 18:18). It was too much for him. What about us? Decentering: It's that simple and that complicated. If we want to be like Jesus, if we want to be more loving, if we want our nation and our world to move toward justice and peace for all of God's creation, if we want what God wants, if in our hearts we are praying, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done"—then we have to move over.

If we believe, like Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah, we are saying "yes" to the daily challenge of decentering ourselves. We are saying "yes" to doing our best to make the turn when we wake up each day and say to ourselves, "today is not about me, it's about Christ." If we want to be a Christian: We have to be about "more than self." We have to try to look at others as Christ does. We have to intentionally reset our minds from "human things" to "divine things." Whether we like it or not.

I hear Jesus' call to decenter not only as individuals, but also as a *nation*. We, the USA, are not the center of the universe, nor is any other nation. We, and every other country, are a unique part of this one little planet revolving around one minor star in the galaxy of God's creation. Whether we like it or not, we are all interconnected economically and politically. Yes, this whole planet that God sent his only Son to save over 2000 years ago. How is that going for us? How is that going for God? The horrific, terrorist attack this past week in Manchester, England killing twenty-two and injuring over 100 mostly young people attending a summer concert has rocked the world. Complex decisions about our federal budget, the world-wide immigration and the refugee crisis, the blight of our opioid epidemic, the rise of hate crimes, the decision on the 2015 Paris Climate accord: All this and more, may tempt us to turn off the news and turn inward. Or we may succumb to the temptation to be critical and cynical and do nothing about it.

But then Lady Wisdom goes out on the street and warns us that "Carelessness kills" and "complacency is murder." And Jesus calls us to live with outstretched arms, embracing the pain of the world with compassion. Decentering is the freedom that Christ offers: freedom from the tyranny of self; freedom to look beyond self.

How do we reset? How do we reset our minds from human to divine things? Jesus tells us plainly in Mark 8:34. A whole course, "Decentering 101" right there in one verse. So simple and so complicated. And so often misinterpreted. I want to clarify a couple of common Christian *misperceptions*: ways that we have sometimes twisted Jesus' call to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him.

First: denying ourselves is *never* a call or a justification to be abused or mistreated. God is always, always on the side of healing. Denying ourselves is a choice we make, not one that is made or forced upon us. Rather, denying ourselves challenges us to develop a humble heart that allows us to listen to other opinions, and the very differing perspective of others. Denying ourselves call us to hold our wants, and our needs loosely, letting the wisdom of Christ form and inform our way of looking at others and ourselves. You can practice this in small ways when you are driving, or in line at the grocery store, or in conversation with your best friend, and in chance encounters with a stranger on the street. Second: Jesus call to, "take up your cross" is *never* something that is forced upon us. It is something that we choose to take up. If someone else is forcing something upon us that we do not feel called to do, that is not what Jesus meant.

As Flora Slosson Wuellner, author, spiritual director, and United Church of Christ pastor has articulated so helpfully, "Our cross is our free choice to lift the burden of suffering from another person."<sup>iii</sup> It is never the same for any two people. Here are some ways she gives to help us recognize if the commitment you are in, or are facing, is really "your cross" or not:

She writes, *If it is "your cross"*

You will be set free to choose your cross or refuse it

You will feel a deep, authentic calling to this cross.

Though the pain and sacrifice are real, you will also experience a definite divinely sent joy, strength, and renewal at your center.

You will find your ability to love will deepen.

You will observe signs of fruitfulness, some positive results and response, at least at times.

An "angel" will be sent to comfort and strengthen you, even as one was sent to Jesus in Gethsemane. The angel usually comes in unexpected ways: a person, a book, an experience of beauty, a lifting of the heart, and so on. But this "angel" always brings comfort.

Finally: a "Simon of Cyrene" will also be sent to help lift your cross, your commitment, our chosen task of love, in very practical ways, even as Simon carried the cross beam for Jesus.

If these signs are not present, you may have taken a cross—committed yourself to a task—that was meant for someone else.<sup>iii</sup>

Is there a new cross that you are being called to take up? Perhaps you are bearing or holding on to a commitment that is not your cross, one that you need to let go of. Let these points help clarify which way you need to go.

The final point I want to make about Jesus' invitation to "take up your cross" and follow him is this: because Jesus' cross confronted systemic evil, in a very public way, to be true to the cross of Christ, Jesus is calling us to take an active role in civic or public life. To "take up our cross," by definition, is not only about our personal salvation and relationships, but is also a clear call to political engagement. Like Peter, we may recoil at this. But if Christ is the Messiah we confess, the One who went to the cross to save and reconcile the world; if we want to follow Christ, we don't have the choice. We cannot retreat behind the comfort of our church culture, or be content to simply babble within the bubble of people who think like we do.

I think our country might benefit if we try to rebrand Memorial Day as "More than Self" day. Yes, we still begin by honoring those who "more than self their country loved,"<sup>iv</sup> sacrificing their lives in the line of duty, for the soul of our country. But let us not stop there. To really honor their sacrifice, as Christians we must take up the challenge Jesus laid before us: to heal our polarized nation through decentering, through a "more than self" divine mind set, that realizes civic virtue is about more than my opinion or personal bias. As Philip Gorski, sociology and religious studies professor at Yale University has written, "There is no way around it: civic virtue is morally demanding. It involves self-discipline and self-sacrifice. The American founders rightly worried that the republican vision might be too demanding for the citizens of the young nation. 'What sort of government shall we have?' Benjamin Franklin was reportedly asked at the Constitutional Convention. He replied: 'A republic—if you can keep it!'"<sup>v</sup>

How are we doing at keeping it here in 2017? Gorski goes on to clarify the vision of our American founders: "The dream of the righteous republic is the dream of a free people governing themselves for the common good...A righteous republic is based on a certain vision of the common good—not just any vision, but a vision that draws deeply on prophetic religion...an ethic of social justice and human equality that requires that we be willing to abridge ourselves for the sake of others."

So yes: Church is *exactly the place* to be on Memorial Day or "More than Self" Sunday. Well done, all of you! I'll end now with your holiday homework: When you're in line picking up ice at the gas station, in the car with your friends or family, flipping burgers at the grill, or Facebooking with your friends: Practice "decentering" by stilling your mind and listening, really listening. And when Jesus calls you to speak: speak the truth in love; and muster the courage to act accordingly. There's Jesus' way and there's our way. When you're standing on the dock, with one foot in the Jesus boat and the other on the "Me first" dock and the boat starts to move away from the shore: may we all remember it's about "More than Self" and jump in the Jesus boat.

i Henri J. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1989) pp. 81-82.

ii Flora Slosson Wuellner, *Enter by the Gate: Jesus' 7 Guidelines When Making Hard Choices* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2004) p. 74.

iii Ibid, pp.74-75.

iv Katharine Lee Bates, "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies," 1893, *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990) No. 564, Stanza 3.

v Philip Gorski, "Becoming America: What Kind of Freedom Does a Republic Promise?" *Christian Century*, March 1, 2017, pp.28-31. This article was excerpted from his book, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton University Press).