

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time  
September 3, 2017

## **Stumbling Into Life**

Matthew 16:13-26a

You know, it's too bad that Sunday morning worship in a local congregation  
doesn't get the press it deserves —  
it really is a remarkable thing that happens each Sunday,  
that you get up and come here to sit in these pews  
to do what we do.

So let's imagine for a moment  
— a little game I've played before but it's good to consider from time to time —  
Imagine that as you arrived at the doors of church today  
a TV news reporter was standing there  
pressing a microphone and a camera into your face  
and asking,  
“Why are you at church this morning?”

I expect there are at least as many different reasons for coming to church  
as there are bodies in this sanctuary this morning...

...some of you are here out of a sense of obligation;  
Your parents raised you this way, and you are keeping the tradition,  
because you believe you should.

...Beyond a sense of duty or right-ness about worship,  
you may be here because you gain strength and focus from worship  
to live your life in faith in the coming week.

...Others of you are here because you have been wounded;  
the world has made you feel that you are worthless,  
and you need a soothing balm applied to your soul,  
you need to be embraced by God, or anyone,  
who really loves you.

...Some of you are parents who have come for your children.  
You want them to learn good biblical wisdom and moral values  
that will serve them well,  
that will enable them to be healthy, happy people  
who contribute to society  
and enjoy the benefits of living an upright life.

...Many of you are here because you have friends here,  
and you enjoy seeing them.

...Some of you who are children or youth are here  
because you've been made to come by your parents,  
and you may be thinking you'd rather be somewhere else.

...Some of you are here  
because of what you believe about Jesus,  
and what Jesus has done for you,  
and for the whole world,  
while others aren't too sure about this Jesus character,  
because the more you get to know him,  
the more you fear he may get in the way  
of what you think you want out of life.

...Some of you are here for reasons I have not even begun to name.

...Some of you may have no idea why you're here,  
but have come anyway  
and are trying to figure out why you keep coming to church.

But I'm going to venture a guess  
that **none** of you came to church today  
**because you feel that you are ready and willing to die.**

Well, that puts you in good company with Jesus' disciples,  
and we'll get back to dying later.

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For now, there is this question Jesus asks his disciples,  
also a question of motivation.

Instead of a question of Why?  
Jesus approaches them with a question of Who?  
*Who do you say that I am?*  
And with that question,  
Jesus gets at the essence of why they are there.

But Jesus is a wise rabbi with a bit of teaching experience,  
and he knows that it is easier for religious folk like us  
to talk about what "people in general" believe,  
easier to focus on other people's faith, or lack thereof,  
than to make a personal statement of faith.

So Jesus asks his disciples, *Who do **people** say that I am?*

The answers are interesting,

and seem to reflect the religious factions of the day:

some say John the Baptist, others Elijah,

still others Jeremiah, or another prophet.

Perhaps if Jesus appeared today

we would have said he was St. Francis of Assisi,

or John Calvin, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Ghandi.

Or maybe some would say Jesus is a quintessential Democrat.

Others, a died-in-the-wool Republican.

Still others would insist that Jesus could only be an Independent.

We like to do that.

Project onto Jesus all sorts of our ideas and perspectives.

After all, who doesn't want Jesus on their side?

But Jesus doesn't let us stay focused on others.

He moves past "people in general,"

and brings the question home

asking his disciples,

*But who do **you** say that I am?*

Little surprise, it is Peter who speaks up first.

You can almost see the other disciples roll their eyes when he does.

Peter, who is always putting his foot in his mouth.

Talk-first-and-think-later-Peter.

But this time, for once, he gets it right –

*You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*

Peter confesses his faith, his belief, his conviction,

that Jesus is not just another prophet,

but the One through whom God's purposes will ultimately be fulfilled.

**Jesus is the Christ,**

**the Son of the Living God.**

And Jesus responds with immediate praise:

*"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!*

*For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,*

*but my Father in heaven.*

*And I tell you, you are Peter,*

*and on this rock I will build my church,*

*and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*

**Can you imagine the love, the pride, the pure joy in Peter's heart  
when he heard those words?**

Peter's confession about who Jesus is  
becomes the foundation for God's enterprise in the world!  
And Peter is IN — solidly in, ALL IN, and tight with Jesus.

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But today we have not concluded our reading at the typical end of the passage.  
We have read on into the next 8 verses...  
...and what happens next is startling!

Once Peter has made his bold confession of belief in Jesus as the Messiah,  
the Son of the Living God,  
Jesus begins to show his disciples  
what his Messiahship will look like.  
And it becomes fairly clear, fairly quickly,  
that it is **not** what they signed on for.  
Jesus begins to talk about suffering and dying.  
And he goes on eventually to say that if his disciples want to follow him,  
**then they too must die with him.**

We might understand if these poor fellows are a little taken aback,  
if they complain, saying,  
Lord, if you had told us this back on our fishing shore,  
we might have stuck with fishing.  
You painted a beautiful picture of fishing for people  
and gathering them into the kingdom of heaven  
which was right over the horizon.  
You didn't say anything about dying on a Roman cross.  
**Jesus, you've changed your tune!**

And, of course, Peter  
— Peter of the hasty word, whose mouth works faster than his brain —  
whose was just affirmed in the strongest terms only a few verses before  
now pulls Jesus aside  
and let's go with another torrent of words,  
this time rebuking Jesus for misunderstanding the way things should be:  
*God forbid it, Lord!*  
*This must never happen to you!*

Now we can forgive Peter.  
It is human nature for us to set our hopes and dreams on a vision.

And human nature, if that vision changes dramatically,  
to recoil in fear,  
or even to lash out in anger.

And Jesus does forgive Peter, as we see in the unfolding of the gospel story.  
But for now Jesus' love becomes tough.  
He turns and says to Peter,  
words that must have struck him deeply with as much shame  
and fear of loss,  
as Jesus earlier words had pride and joy:  
*"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."*

### **Can you imagine hearing these excruciating words?**

Having just received the most joyful affirmation of his lifetime,  
Peter now receives what has to be one of the greatest blows ever to be dealt  
to his self-understanding.

With Peter still reeling, Jesus elaborates,  
*If any want to become my followers,  
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.  
For those who want to save their life will lose it,  
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.  
For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?*

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And so the story of Peter and the disciples returns us to our question:

**How many of us came here  
because we believe we are ready to die?**

Peter clearly was not ready.  
Nor is it likely the other disciples were any more ready.  
But they—and we—must learn  
**that we must die with Christ to live with him.**

There are many things to which we must die:

We must die to...  
our false selves — these images of who we are  
that we have built up over the years  
as protective layers shielding us from past pains.

We must die to...  
our visions of life in the world  
when they do not adhere to God's deeper vision for us,  
and in fact cut us off from the richer life God intends.

We must die to...  
our attachments to things of this world  
when they get in the way of our attachment to God  
or when they distort our relationships with God's world and God's people.

We must die, ultimately, to our need for control,  
to control all outcomes, to control other people,  
and to control God.

The Apostle Paul wrote of 'reproducing the pattern' of Jesus' death  
and thus sharing in his resurrection.

The soul is set free through dying and rising.  
We proclaim this pattern in the Lord's Supper  
when we say  
**Great is the mystery of faith:  
Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.**

Franciscan spiritual writer Richard Rohr calls it "Falling Upward."

He reminds us of the poet Goethe, who wrote:  
"And so long as you do not know that to die is to become,  
you are just a wretched visitor on this dark earth."

"To die and thus to become is the pattern of transformation  
in the entire physical and biological world.  
Why not the human?  
There seems to be no other cauldron  
of growth and transformation."<sup>1</sup>

In this journey of dying,  
of giving up a cherished vision to welcome a greater vision,  
**Peter learns truly to love Jesus.**

The remarkable thing, perhaps,  
is that Peter and Jesus continue to journey together  
but it is a journey of constant learning for Peter,  
and constant growing,  
and not an easy one.  
**But how could the quest for perfect love be easy?**

Soren Kierkegaard once said:

**Perfect love means  
to love the one through whom one became unhappy.**

Surely, this is the only way God can love us.  
For though God has loved us from the beginning,  
how often must we make God unhappy.

Yet God loves us still.

And surely, this is the only way we can learn to love God,  
and to love one another.

Jesus has made Peter very unhappy  
by disabusing him of his notions of the future.

But it is only as Peter dies to his original vision  
and embraces Jesus' vision  
that he will become who Jesus calls him to be

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In the past two weeks,  
the officers at Fourth Pres  
have been giving their statements of faith and calling to the Session.  
Their statements have been beautiful, each in their own way.  
Remarkable testimonies of joy and struggle  
of pain and blessing, doubt and faith,  
solid rocks and stumbling blocks,  
and yes, of dying and rising to new life.

And Jesus was there in that room,  
listening to their stories,  
saying to them,  
*Blessed are you...*  
*...And I tell you, you are Peter,*  
*and on this rock I will build my church,*  
*and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.*

And Jesus sees you, too, and sees me,  
falling over our stumbling blocks,  
wrestling with our loves and fears, our hope and despair,  
our living and dying.

**But Jesus always picks us back up again,  
and takes us back into his embrace,  
and turns our stumbling blocks  
into stepping stones  
to higher, truer life.**

Take heart, Peter.

Jesus, the Son of the Living God, is alive among us,  
and he meets us today... at this table.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Richard Rohr, "The Path of Descent", August 1, 2017, [cac.org](http://cac.org)