

Colossians 1:15-20

Mark 9:9-13, 30-37

March 19, 2017

Third Sunday in Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Journey to the Cross
THE JESUS PARADOX

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A man stumbled in through the front door of his house after a long day at work. His face was red, he was out of breath, his clothes were dirty, and he was sweating heavily. His wife looked at him and said, "My goodness! What in the world happened to you?" The man said, "I just ran all the way home behind a bus, and I saved \$1." His wife shook her head and said, "You fool! You could have run home behind a taxi cab and saved \$10!"

That story sounds a lot like what happened to me a week ago when I went to Belk in Wilmington to buy a new suit. After the clerk had rung up the sale, I had swiped my credit card and signed the receipt, and he had put the suit in a bag, he handed me the suit bag and said, "Thank you, Mr. Gladden. You saved \$330 today." As I walked away, I thought to myself, "If I hadn't spent any money, I would have saved \$550!"

(Of course, I also wouldn't have a new suit, which I really need!)

I guess my experience in Belk proves the old saying, "You can save money by spending it." That statement is a classic paradox, which Webster's New World Dictionary defines as "a statement that seems contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd but that may actually be true."

There is an ancient Chinese folk tale from the 3rd century B.C. about a blacksmith who was trying to sell a spear and a shield he had made. A potential customer asked him how good his spear was. He replied that it could pierce any shield. When the customer asked him how good his shield was, he said it could defend you against all spear attacks. The customer thought for a minute, then asked the blacksmith what would happen if he struck his shield with his spear. The blacksmith had no answer.

As a result, the Chinese word for "self-contradictory" or "paradox" is made up of two characters, one for spear, one for shield.¹

Here are some paradoxical statements:

- * Oscar Wilde wrote, "I can resist anything except temptation."
- * Socrates wrote: "I know one thing, that I know nothing."
- * "Deep down, you're really shallow."
- * "Nobody goes to that restaurant anymore because it's too crowded."
- * Yogi Berra said, "Baseball is 90% mental and the other half is physical" and, talking about the problems with the sun in left field at Yankee Stadium, "It gets late early out here."

What about these paradoxical statements?

* “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” (Mark 9:31)

* “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” (Mark 9:35)

* “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:35)

* “God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:36)

Jesus as the crucified Lord of glory is a paradox. He was 2000 years ago. He still is today. The description of “paradox” and its literary use talks about “a person having seemingly contradictory qualities.” A rhetorical paradox is when a character makes a seemingly inconsistent or contradictory statement, such as when Jesus talks about the Son of Man being handed over to suffer and die on a cross. A situational paradox is when characters find themselves in difficult to reconcile circumstances, such as when Peter makes the true confession of faith, “You are the Messiah,” only to be told by Jesus that he must suffer and die in Jerusalem.²

Three times in this middle section of Mark’s gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that he is on his way to Jerusalem to suffer and die and rise again. Each time the disciples learn a little bit more about who Jesus is, Jesus talks about suffering and dying. The disciples misunderstand and Jesus has to correct them.

* When Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter correctly answered, “You are the Messiah.” Then Jesus told all of his disciples he was going to suffer and die. Peter rebuked him. Jesus rebuked Peter, and talked about what it means to be his disciple and follow him (“take up your cross”).

* When Peter, James, and John were coming down the mountain with Jesus after they got a glimpse of his resurrection glory in the Transfiguration, Jesus talked with them about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. A little bit later, the disciples argued among themselves about who is the greatest. Jesus taught them about what it means to be his follower (“the first must be last”).

* When the disciples were following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, amazed at everything they had seen and heard, Jesus told them what was going to happen to him when they got to Jerusalem. James and John asked Jesus for positions of power and authority in his coming kingdom, and Jesus taught them all what it means to be his follower (“whoever wishes to be great must be a servant; whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all; the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”).

That’s all very interesting, but what’s it got to do with us? Someone asked the other day, “What if the disciples *had* asked Jesus to explain what they didn’t understand?” Well, actually, he does just that, by telling them three times on the way to Jerusalem what is going to happen to him and why. Mark is quite up-front in telling us, “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” (Mark 9:32)

But why? When I was in seminary, there were several times when I didn't understand what a professor was talking about in his or her lecture. Far too many times I didn't ask because I didn't want to look stupid or I didn't think I knew enough to ask about what I didn't know (there's a paradox for you!) or I was just plain intimidated by the professor (my problem, not theirs!). Maybe that's why the disciples were afraid to ask Jesus about what they didn't understand.

Or, maybe they were afraid to ask because they really didn't want to hear what he might say. After all, Jesus had already talked to them twice about going up to Jerusalem in order to suffer and die, and then he had told them what it meant for them to be his followers: "Deny yourselves, take up your cross daily, and follow me."

Maybe that's why we "don't ask" and do our best to avoid the cross. I read a comment this week about how people crowd churches for Easter Sunday services, but not for Good Friday services, "We are always tempted to make a detour around the Cross in favor of the open tomb." In his 1937 book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer used the term "cheap grace" to describe our tendency and desire to avoid the demands and costs of following Jesus. He described "cheap grace" as "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."³

We are always tempted to make a detour around the Cross in favor of the open tomb because the Jesus paradox is hard for us to grasp, even today. A crucified Messiah, a Savior nailed to a cross — these are supreme paradoxes. Yet, we live in a world in which certain, contrary ideas seem to hold true, at least from the world's perspective:

- * Might makes right.
- * Only the strong survive.
- * The Golden Rule: He who has the gold makes the rules.
- * Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing.

No wonder, then, that the apostle Paul says that the message about the cross is foolishness and a stumbling block. It was then, it is now.

My beloved professor and mentor, Dr. Paul Achtemeier ("Bud") wrote about two "mind-bending paradoxes" of Jesus' life, death and resurrection:

- * The Son of the God who created the world and humankind is put to death by the very creatures God created.

- * The only way life can find greatness is through the renunciation of the search for greatness.⁴

On this Lenten journey to the cross, we are reading stories about Jesus and his disciples on the way, on the road, on a journey to Jerusalem. This is more than a geographical itinerary; it is a theological map that leads to the reality that the Son of Man must be handed over and killed. But, remember a definition of a paradox? "A statement that seems contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd but that may actually be true." The crucified Lord of glory — the Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified — in him, this paradoxical Jesus, we have our hope.

Near the end of Mark's gospel, as Jesus hangs dying on the cross, the passersby deride him and say, "Save yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself." (Mark 15:29-31) I don't know if those statements qualify as paradoxes, but they are certainly full of irony. The passersby and the religious officials were mocking, but they spoke the truth: By not saving himself, Jesus saved others. That's the point.

Geoffrey R. King puts into words the ultimate paradox of our Christian faith when he says, "Here is a faith which offers to the world life . . . and the badge of it is the symbol of death." The cross has been called "the sign of contradiction." We do proclaim a paradoxical faith: "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son." (John 1:14) "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." (Galatians 6:14) "The message about the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18, 24)

The great bishop of North Africa in the 4th century A.D., St. Augustine, describes the Jesus paradox this way: "The deformity of Christ forms you. If he had not willed to be deformed, you would not have recovered the form which you had lost. Therefore he was deformed when he hung on the cross. But his deformity is our comeliness. In this life, therefore, let us hold fast to the deformed Christ." (from his *Discourses on the Psalms*)

Thanks be to God that we have and serve a Lord and Savior and Messiah who was crucified for our sakes, but who has been raised from the dead that we might live for God always.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, you call us to follow you, to turn away from our own selfish interests, and to take up our cross and follow after you, even if the path is difficult to see or is heading in a direction we would never have chosen for ourselves. Forgive us for being so quick to question and so hesitant to follow. Help us to see with the eyes of faith, rather than from our own human point of view. Teach us to follow without fear, knowing that you are always with us, leading the way. Amen.

NOTES

¹Charles Moffat, "The Unstoppable Force Vs Immovable Object Paradox," www.nerdovore.com.

²"Paradox," at www.literarydevices.com.

³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1937), p. 47.

⁴Paul J. Achtemeier, "Mark 9:30-37," *Interpretation*, April 1976, p. 183.