

Matthew 16: 13-20

STARTLE US, O GOD, WITH YOUR TRUTH AND OPEN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS TO YOUR WORD, THAT HEARING WE MAY BELIEVE, AND BELIEVING, TRUST YOU WITH OUR LIVES: THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.

RICHARD LISCHER IS AN ORDAINED MINISTER AND A PROFESSOR EMERITUS AT DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL. A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, LISCHER HAD TO ENDURE WHAT NO PARENT OUGHT TO ENDURE: THE DEATH OF HIS SON, ADAM. ADAM DIED OF CANCER WHEN HE WAS IN HIS MID-30'S.

SEVEN YEARS LATER, LISCHER WROTE ABOUT HIS EXPERIENCE OF LOSING HIS ADULT SON IN A PERCEPTIVE, SAD, AND WISE BOOK ENTITLED *STATIONS OF THE HEART*. IN THE BOOK, LISCHER RECALLS ADAM'S WEDDING DAY. HE RECALLS OFFICIATING AT HIS SON'S WEDDING. AND HE REMEMBERS SAYING TO ADAM AND HIS BRIDE, JENNY: "ADAM AND JENNY, SOMEDAY YOU WILL BE OLD. STILL CUTE, BUT OLD. AND AT YOUR 60TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY YOU WILL HOLD HANDS AND ASK, 'HOW DID WE GET SO LUCKY?'" REFLECTING ON THAT WEDDING SERMON, LISCHER GOES ON TO REMARK: "I THINK PREACHERS SHOULD SPEAK ONLY WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO SAY AND NOT ONE WORD MORE. THEY SHOULD NOT PRETEND TO HAVE PRIVILEGED VIEW OF THE FUTURE."

A PRIVILEGED VIEW OF THE FUTURE..HAVE YOU EVER REMARKED WITH CERTAINTY ABOUT WHAT THE FUTURE WILL LOOK LIKE IN YOR LIFE, ONLY TO FIND YOURSELF WANTING TO TAKE BACK WHAT YOU SAID WHEN THE FUTURE ARRIVES?

I REMEMBER THE DAYS BEFORE MARTY AND I BECAME PARENTS, AND WATCHING OTHERS PARENT. WE WOULD SEE A CHILD DO SOMETHING AND WE WOULD SEE HOW THE PARENTS RESPONDED OR FAILED TO RESPOND. AND WE WOULD SAY TO OURSELVES, "WHEN WE HAVE KIDS, WE'LL NEVER DO THAT. WE'LL NEVER RAISE OUR VOICES IN A PUBLIC PLACE WITH OUR TODDLERS! WE'LL NEVER LET OUR KIDS DO THAT...WE'LL NEVER...WE'LL NEVER.

AND THEN WE BECAME PARENTS AND WHAT DO YOU THINK HAPPENED? WE DID THE EXACT THINGS WE PLEDGED WE WOULD NEVER DO.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO IMAGINE THAT YOU HAVE A PRIVILEGED VIEW OF THE FUTURE, WHEN YOU REALLY DON'T HAVE A CLUE?

I RAISE THE QUESTION BECAUSE OF OUR STORY FROM MATTHEW. A WELL-KNOWN STORY. JESUS ASKS HIS DISCIPLES WHO PEOPLE SAY THAT HE IS. AND THE DISCIPLES RESPOND: JOHN THE BAPTIST, ELIJAH, JEREMIAH. "BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?" JESUS ASKS. "YOU ARE THE MESSIAH," PETER REPLIES, "THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD."

IT'S CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION! "BLESSED ARE YOU, SIMON SON OF JONAH!" PROCLAIM IT FROM THE HOUSETOPS, RIGHT? TELL EVERYONE YOU MEET! EVANGELIZE..SPREAD THE GOOD NEWS.

NOT QUITE. "THEN JESUS STERNLY ORDERED THE DISCIPLES NOT TO TELL ANYONE THAT HE WAS THE MESSIAH." WHY DOES JESUS DO THIS? WHY DOES JESUS, ON THE ONE HAND, CELEBRATE PETER'S CONFESSION...AND ON THE OTHER HAND, SAY TO THE DISCIPLES: TELL NO ONE ABOUT PETER'S CONFESSION. TELL NO ONE WHO I REALLY AM.

I THINK JESUS WANTS TO MAKE SURE THAT HIS DISCIPLES DO NOT TAKE A PRIVILEGED VIEW, OR MAKE ASSUJPTIONS...ABOUT THE FUTURE. AFTER ALL, IT WOULD BE EASY FOR THE DISCIPLES TO PICTRUE A VERY PARTICULAR FUTURE. LOOK AT US...WE'RE JESUS' INNER CIRCLE....SURELY JESUS WILL GIVE US TITLES AND POWER AND PRESTIGE WHEN HE OVERTHROWS THE ROMANS AS MESSIAH, WHEN HE RULES ISRAEL AS GOD'S ANNOINTED.

BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT HAPPENED. AS THE MESSIAH, JESUS DID NOT KICK OUT THE ROMANS. HE WAS CRUCIFIED BY THE ROMANS. AT THIS POINT IN THE GOSPEL STORY, THE DISCIPLES COULD NOT COMPREHEND ALL THAT. AT THIS POINT IN THE STORY, THE DISCIPLES HAD ONLY SEEN THE GOOD STUFF: THE MIRACLES, THE HEALING, THE CROWDS GATHERING TO HEAR JESUS.

THEY HAD NOT SEEN JESUS BETRAYED. THEY HAD NOT SEEN HIM SUFFER. THEY HAD NOT SEEN HIM DIE. THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IT MEANT TO BE GOD'S MESSIAH WAS INCOMPLETE. SO JESUS SAID—DON'T SAY A WORD. YOU STILL HAVE MUCH TO LEARN.

JESUS IS THE MESSIAH. THAT'S WHAT PETER SAYS. BUT PETER...HAD NO WAY...AT THAT TIME IN HIS LIFE, TO GET IT. NO WAY TO UNDERSTAND THAT BEING GOD'S MESSIAH DIDN'T MEAN GAINING, IT MEANT LOSING....IT DIDN'T MEAN SUCCESS, IT MEANT SACRIFICE. AND OF COURSE, THE QUESTION TODAY IS NOT ABOUT PETER. IT'S ABOUT YOU AND ME. BECAUSE PETER'S CONFESSION IS OUR CONFESSION TOO. JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, OUR LORD AND SAVIOR. AND WE OFTEN SAY THAT IT MEANS JESUS SACRIFICED HIS LIFE FOR OUR SINS. WHICH IS TRUE. BUT I THINK THAT UNDERSTANDING IS ALSO INCOMPLETE.

JESUS'S SACRIFICE IS MORE THAN OUR SINS. IT'S ABOUT HOW WE LIVE OUR LIVES. IT'S ABOUT WHO WE WILL GIVE OUR LIVES FOR. DO YOU REMEMBER THE SCENE AT THE END OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL, WHEN JESUS IS IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE, AND HE'S BEING ARRESTED? MATTHEW WRITES: "SUDDENLY, ONE OF THOSE WITH JESUS PUT HIS HAND ON HIS SWORD, DREW IT, AND STRUCK THE SLAVE OF THE HIGH PRIEST, CUTTING OFF HIS EAR. ONE OF JESUS' FOLLOWERS WANTED TO FIGHT. ONE OF JESUS' FOLLOWERS WAS THINKING, THIS IS THE MESSIAH'S WAY. "THEN JESUS SAID TO HIM, 'PUT YOUR SWORD BACK INTO ITS PLACE...DO YOU THINK THAT I CANNOT APPEAL TO MY FATHER, AND HE WILL AT ONCE SEND ME MORE THAN TWELVE LEGIONS OF ANGELS?"

IN OTHER WORDS, JESUS COULD HAVE BEEN VIOLENT TO HIS ENEMIES. HE COULD HAVE MADE THE "BAD GUYS" LOSE IN THE WAY THE WORLD DEFINES WINNING AND LOSING. BUT HE DIDN'T DO IT.

JESUS WAS WILLING TO SACRIFICE...HIS POWER, HIS COMFORT, HIS VERY LIFE....IN THE NAME OF GOD'S LOVE. AND AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS, SO SHOULD WE. OUR TEXT FROM ROMANS REMINDS US: "PRESENT YOUR BODIES AS A LIVING SACRIFICE, HOLY AND ACCEPTABLE TO GOD...DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD, BUT BE TRANSFORMED...."

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN SOMEONE DO IT? MAKING THEIR LIFE A LIVING SACRIFICE FOR THE SAKE OF ANOTHER? I RECALL A COUPLE FROM A CONGREGATION I SERVED YEARS AGO. THEY WOULD ATTEND WORSHIP EVERY SUNDAY. SHE WAS PUSHING HIM IN A WHEELCHAIR...THEY WERE IN THEIR LATE 70'S. FRIENDLIEST COUPLE. ONE DAY I LEARNED THAT NOT TOO LONG AFTER THEY WERE MARRIED, HE SUFFERED A STROKE. IT WAS AT A

VERY EARLY AGE IN LIFE. AND WHAT THEY PICTURED THEIR LIFE TOGETHER LOOKING LIKE, ON THEIR WEDDING DAY, WAS NOT WHAT IT ENDED UP LOOKING LIKE. SHE HAD TO DO MUCH CARING FOR HIM. SHE HAD TO REARRANGE HER LIFE FOR HIM. HE HAD TO LET HIMSELF BE CARED FOR....BUT THEY DID IT. AND THERE THEY WERE, DECADES LATER STILL MARRIED. IT'S MOVING THING TO SEE SOMEONE BECOME A LIVING SACRIFICE FOR THE PERSON THEY LOVE. SOMEONE IN THEIR OWN FAMILY. A FRIEND WHO MIGHT AS BE FAMILY.

WHAT JESUS CALLS US TO IS SOMETHING EVEN GREATER THAN THAT. WHEN WE PROCLAIM JESUS AS MESSIAH AND LORD, JESUS CALLS US TO CONSIDER THE SACRIFICE WE ARE WILLING TO MAKE NOT JUST FOR OUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS, BUT FOR THE GREATER COMMUNITY. FOR NEIGHBOR. FOR STRANGER. FOR THOSE WE DON'T LIKE. FOR THOSE WHO MAKE US ANGRY. NOT JUST TO TOLERATE THOSE PEOPLE. BUT TO SACRIFICE FOR THOSE PEOPLE.

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* TOLD THE STORY OF PERRY REESE. REESE WAS A REMARKABLE BASKETBALL COACH IN BERLIN, OHIO, WHICH WAS, AT LEAST AT THAT TIME, A SMALL, ALL-WHITE, MOSTLY AMISH AND MENNONITE COMMUNITY, A COMMUNITY WHICH HADN'T CHANGED MUCH IN 200 YEARS.

REESE DID NOT LOOK LIKE HIS COMMUNITY. HE WAS AFRICAN AMERICAN, THE ONLY BLACK PERSON IN EASTERN HOLMES COUNTY. HE WAS ALSO SINGLE. AND HE WAS ROMAN CATHOLIC. HE WAS HIRED TO BE THE ASSISTANT BASKETBALL COACH. BUT WHEN THE HEAD COACH RESIGNED UNEXPECTEDLY, REESE—BY DEFAULT—TOOK HIS PLACE AS THE HEAD COACH AT HILAND HIGH SCHOOL.

AFTER REESE TOOK OVER, THERE WAS GRUMBLING. THERE WAS SKEPTICISM. THERE WAS BLATANT RACISM...ONE LANDLORD "FORGOT" THAT HE DIDN'T RENT TO SINGLE PEOPLE; ANOTHER GROUP OF GENTLEMEN IN TOWN TOOK REESE OUT FOR A COUPLE DRINKS, AND THEN TRIED TO GET HIM PICKED UP FOR A DUI SO THAT HE'D BE FIRED.

NOW...IF YOU WERE PERRY REESE, WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE? WOULD YOU STAY WITH THE JOB? WOULD MAKE THE PERSONAL SACRIFICE OF PUTTING UP WITH ALL THE

HATRED AND BIGOTRY...JUST SO YOU COULD COACH SOME TEENAGERS ON THE BASKETBALL TEAM?

WHY NOT FIND A MORE ENLIGHTENED PLACE TO COACH? WHY NOT FIND ANOTHER TOWN, ANOTHER TEAM? PERRY REESE STAYED.

AND HILAND BEGAN TO WIN BASKETBALL GAMES---AN UNPRECEDENTED NUMBER OF BASKETBALL GAMES, UNTIL FINALLY, UNBELIEVABLY, THEIR COMMUNITY TEAM OF MENNONITE AND AMISH BOYS WON THE STATE CHAMPIONSHIP.

ALONG THE WAY, COACH REESE WON THE ACCEPTANCE, AND THE AFFECTION, AND THE RESPECT OF THE COMMUNITY—NOT ONLY BECAUSE THE TEAM WON, ALTHOUGH THAT HELPED---BUT ALSO BECAUSE OF HIS QUIET GRACE, HIS WORK ETHIC, AND HIS PERSONAL STRENGTH AND LOYALTY TO THE YOUTH IN TOWN. AND THE HIGH SCHOOL KIDS LOVED HIM!

WHEN PERRY REESE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH AN INOPERABLE BRAIN TUMOR, THE COMMUNITY OF BERLIN, OHIP DISCOVERED THAT IT HAD CHANGED DEEPLY AND PRFOUNDLY BEAUSE OF THE WAY REESE LIVED HIS LIFE. BECAUSE OF THE SACRIFICES HE HAD MADE FOR THAT COMMUNITY. AT HIS FUNERAL, THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY GATHERED IN ST. PETER'S CATHOLIC CHURCH. DURING THE SERVICE, THERE WAS A MOMENT OF PAUSE, TENSION ALMOST. EVERYONE WAS THERE FOR HIS FUNERAL. MENNONITES, BAPTISTS....BUT THEN IT WAS TIME FOR COMMUNION. INCLUDING PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT CATHOLIC IN COMMUNION? IT'S AGAINST THE RULES IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. WHAT WAS THE PRIEST TO DO?

WELL, THIS WAS PERRY REESE'S FUNERAL....HE KNEW WHAT TO DO. EVERYONE CAME FORWARD AND EVERYONE WAS SERVED. YOU WONDER IF ANY OF THE PEOPLE THERE, AT THAT FUNERAL, COMING FORWARD FOR COMMUION, WERE SOME OF THE SAME PEOPLE TALKING BEHIND REESE'S BACK, TRYING TO DRIVE PERRY REESE OUT OF TOWN WHEN HE FIRST BECAME HEAD COACH?

“PRESENT YOUR BODIES AS A LIVING SACRIFICE....” WRITES PAUL.

I DO NOT KNOW WHAT THE EXACT NATURE OF THE SACRIFICE THAT GOD JUST MAY BE ASKING YOU TO MAKE TODAY. BUT I DO KNOW THAT AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS, WE ARE ALL ASKED TO DO IT.

I ALSO KNOW THAT WHOMEVER THAT SACRIFICE IS FOR...IT WILL CHANGE THEIR FUTURE. AND IT MIGHT JUST CHANGE YOURS TOO.