

## "From Me to Thee"

Micah 2:1-3; Matthew 16:21-27

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 3, 2016 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

A well-dressed Wall Street banker-type had car trouble one morning, so he ended up taking the Bronx subway to work. As he got on he was pushed and shoved like everybody else who rides public transportation in New York. His expensive clothes did nothing to protect him from the scramble of hundreds of other commuters who were also trying to get to their destinations.

The longer he rode, the more irritated he got. He was not used to this kind of travel and he knew he never would want to be. Finally he couldn't stand to be quiet about it any longer, and so he turned to a guy in overalls with a lunch bucket hanging onto the strap next to his. "You know, I hate this subway. I never ride on it. As a matter of fact, this is the first time I've been forced to ride on it in over ten years."

The fellow next to him just took it all in, then replied as only a New Yorker can: "Mister, you can't know just how much we've missed you!"

It's easy to get self-absorbed with the moment and to see life only from the perspective of how it affects us. It's a big world out there but, at such times, it has a tendency to become rather small. Nothing outside ourselves counts for anything. No one else's concern matters. That's a characteristic of human nature that hasn't changed much over the centuries.

Today we are coming off Easter Sunday, that day of celebration which brings the message that even death could not contain Christ. We've heard again that God so loved us that even in crucifixion ultimate good triumphed. We recall anew that each of us is so important that Jesus sacrificed himself for us. That joyful message of Easter stays with us all year round.

Our Gospel reading for this morning takes us back before that Passover week in Jerusalem. Jesus is talking with his disciples and tells them of the fate awaiting him. He describes the suffering ahead.

Afterward Peter, one of his closest and most trusted, pulls him aside and says this surely can't be. "Lord, there must be some mistake. You can't really mean what you say. You can count on me and the rest of us to watch out for you. We'll keep you safe so that nothing like this will ever happen to you. Besides, what would we do without you? What will happen to us? Everything we've worked for will be gone. Everything we've given up will go for naught. No, don't talk this way. God forbid it!"

But when Jesus heard Peter say those words, or something like them, he chastised his disciple. He told him that God has a plan and purpose that must not, and cannot, be changed. He understood that Peter's feelings were largely limited to how the future would affect him personally and so his words reflected that. Jesus told Peter that he needed to get outside himself so he could better understand divine will rather than human desire.

Lack of wider vision on the part of his disciples was a continual challenge for Jesus. Time and again they were so caught up with the immediate and the personal that they missed the very points that Jesus was trying to make. Certain passages come immediately to mind, such as:

"People were bringing babies to him to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'"

Or... "One day Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let us go over to the other side of the lake.' As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down so that the boat was being swamped. The disciples went and woke him, saying, 'Master, Master, we're going to drown.' He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. 'Where is your faith?' he asked his disciples."

Even further tis comes to mind... "An argument started out among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest.'"

So often his disciples saw what was immediately on front of them, but they didn't understand. We can be critical of his companions, but then I wonder how much better any of us would have done than they? Would we have seen what they failed to perceive?

When we first open our eyes as children we see the world stretching out around us, and we are right in the middle of it. Everything we see is in relationship to us. Distance and height and direction are determined by their correlation to ourselves. This remains true of our physical vision our whole lives. We are the center of the world around us. Everything is defined by where we stand.

The same is true of our emotional viewpoint. Some things hurt us and we regard them as bad; we hope they will never happen again. Some things please us and we look upon them as good; we can't wait until they recur another time. Our standard of value is the way things affect us personally. We are again in the very center of our world but, unlike physical sight which can't be altered, our minds and souls are capable of shifting our perspective should we want to.

The problem of always viewing life from our perceived focus is that we are not the center of the world. Our natural point of view seems to put us there, but it is a false assumption. The world does not revolve around ourselves no matter how much we might wish it did. The center of the center is really the Creator's space. Only God can see everything from the inside out.

As children we grow in a selfish ways. When we're hungry we cry until we get our need attended to. When we want affection we cry until we evoke a response. When we need to be changed we cry until something happens. That "me centered" self-absorption is probably a necessity for survival. It keeps us alive and healthy. The problem here is that we often fail to move beyond this. What should be a stage in our development, becomes our permanent

perspective. And so if this persists, we may never fully become the men and women we are intended to be and live according to God's plan for life.

In Henrik Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt*, the main character at one point goes to an asylum in an effort to be himself. He assumes that here men are most "outside themselves."

The institute director corrects him: "Outside themselves? Oh no, you're wrong. It's here that men are most themselves—themselves and nothing but themselves." He goes on to say that the room is full of people who are nothing but themselves and their needs and their concerns and their desires. They are like a sealed cask where nothing or no one can get inside. Their world is totally centered on themselves.

That description from the play comes close to fitting a lot people we know. Sometimes it may even describe us.

Right after Jesus rebuked Peter for his narrow vision and his ego-centered outlook, he then follows with these words: "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."

Here I think Jesus is not so much referring to physical life, but to matters of the soul. True disciples are ones who can get outside themselves long enough that they can begin to understand how other people feel and what other people need. It is to know and appreciate that God is the center of the universe and not we ourselves. It is to give up our life in the sense of having everything revolve around us, expecting that it is everyone else's duty to bring us pleasure or do our bidding.

"This is my way," says Jesus. "The totally-consumed self must die if you are to move onto the next plane of spiritual development. You must be able to get outside yourself in order to find yourself. You must give up your presumed securities so that you might experience life in its fullest."

To take but a simple example: the composer who wants to create something of lasting beauty must be able to move past himself if he is to compose for his audience. He must hear the notes as they will hear them, experience the rhythm as they will experience it. When you create solely for yourself the work isn't broad enough to let anyone else in.

If you aspire to be a Christian for the sole purpose of what you can get out of it, then you will never truly find what you are looking for. You will never discover its full power to transform you. It's a paradox that you find your life by losing it, that you gain your greatest pleasure by bringing pleasure to others, that you get your deepest needs met by helping others to get their needs met.

Friends, the world says that happiness comes through self-indulgence. Jesus says it derives from putting God at the center of your life. So the question is: Who are you going to believe? A whole lot depends on how you answer that.