

“What Will the Future Hold?”  
Matthew 16:13-20; Romans 12:1-2  
12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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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-30s.

Seven years later, Lischer wrote about this experience of losing his adult son in a perceptive, sad, and wise book entitled *Stations of the Heart*.

In that 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 sixtieth wedding anniversary you will hold hands and ask,  
‘How did we get so lucky?’”

Reflecting on that wedding homily, 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 a privileged view of the future.”<sup>1</sup>

A privileged view of the future...

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lischer, “Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son,” New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

Have you ever remarked with certainty about what the future will look like in your life, only to find yourself wanting to take back what you said when the future arrives?

I remember in the days before I became a parent, my wife and I had a few friends who were already parents.

And we would see their child do something.

And we would see how our friends responded or failed to respond to their child misbehaving.

And we would say to ourselves, “When we become parents, we’ll never do it THAT way.”

We’ll never lose our cool in a public place with OUR toddlers!

We’ll never let our kids have THAT much screen time!

We’ll never, we’ll never...

And then we became parents.

And what do you think happened?

We did the EXACT things our friends were doing when we pledged WE would never do those things as a parent.

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?

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I raise the subject this morning because of the story in our first text for today.

Go back to the Matthew passage.

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?”

“You are the Messiah,” Peter replies, “the Son of the living God.”

It’s a cause for celebration.

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!”

Proclaim it from the housetops, right?

Not quite.

“Then he 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 assumptions...

about the future.

After all, it would be easy for the disciples to picture 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 anointed!

Of course, 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.

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This summer, I decided to read Albert Camus' novel, *The Plague*.  
Yes...this was of my idea of a relaxing thing to do this summer.  
Feel free to laugh at me. My wife already has.

Actually, I wasn't reading it.  
I was RE-reading it.

The first time I read *The Plague*, I was right out of seminary.  
At that time in my life, I enjoyed the book, but I didn't really know what it was about.

I mean, on the one hand, I knew what it was about.

Camus is writing about the town of Oran being hit by bubonic plague. It just comes out of the blue. Many people die. The town is

quarantined, shut off from the world. It lasts for a year or so, and then it goes away.<sup>2</sup>

That's what it was about.

But I didn't understand at that time in my life what it was about.

Because Camus isn't just writing about plague.

He's writing about the vulnerability of every human life.

About the way events can spin out of control, turn on a dime, and any life can be turned upside down....like that.

But re-reading *The Plague*, after all these years have gone by, after experiencing cancer in my immediate family and our extended family, and feeling very vulnerable in those moments...I get it.

Re-reading *The Plague*, in the midst of a pandemic, I get it.

At least, I get it much more than I did when I was 25.

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Do you see what we're talking about here?

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.

Of course, the question today is not about Peter.

It's about you and me.

Because Peter's confession is our confession too.

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus, "The Plague," New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Jesus is the Messiah, our Lord and Savior.

And we often say in church 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 about more than our sins.

It's about how we live our lives.

It's about WHO we will give our lives for...

Let me get at it like this.

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 with his enemies.

He could have made the “bad guys” lose in the way that world defines winning and losing.

But he didn't do it.

Jesus was willing to sacrifice—  
his power, his comfort, his life...  
in the name of God's love.

And as followers of Jesus, so should we.

Do you remember our second text for today?

“...present your bodies as a living sacrifice,” writes Paul, “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 come to church every Sunday. She was pushing him in a wheelchair...my guess is that they were each around 60, 65 years old. Friendliest couple in the world, I enjoyed talking with them on Sunday mornings.

One day, I asked someone else in the church about their story.  
Why was he in a wheelchair?

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 more 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.

Still taking great joy in each other, and in God's gift of life.

It's a moving thing to see someone become a living sacrifice for the person they love. Someone in their own family. A friend who might as well be family.

Some of you have done that very thing.

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.

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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 an 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 gentleman in town took Reese out for a couple drinks, and then tried to get him picked for a DUI so that he’d be fired.

Now...if you were Perry Reese, what would you have done at that moment?

Would you stay with the job?

Would make the personal sacrifice of putting up with all that garbage 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 captured a 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 played a role—but also because of his quiet grace,

and his work ethic, and his personal strength, and his loyalty to the youngsters.

High school kids loved him!

They hung out at his house.

When some of the basketball players made a big mistake—they broke into and stole merchandise from a hardware store—

Reese took personal responsibility for them  
making sure they spent a couple weeks  
in a juvenile detention center,  
and then reinstating them on the team.

When Perry Reese was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, the community of Berlin, Ohio discovered that it had changed deeply and profoundly because of the way Reese lived his life.

Because of the sacrifices that 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 the 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.

Everyone was served.

I wonder if any of the people there, at that funeral, coming forward for communion, were some of the same people talking behind Reece's back, trying to drive Perry Reece out of town when he first became head coach?<sup>3</sup>

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“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice...” writes Paul.

I do not know what the exact nature is of the sacrifice  
that God just may be asking you to make this day.

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 just might change yours too.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> I was reminded of this article when I ran across a sermon by the Rev. Dr. John Buchanan, “Called,” preached on May 6, 2001, at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL. The article, “Higher Education,” by Gary Smith, appeared in *Sports Illustrated* on March 5, 2001.