

September 3, 2023

Text: Isaiah 55:6-11; Matthew 16: 21-26 (16:24 focus verse)

Theme: “Making It or Faking It?”

A couple of years ago AT&T ran a commercial that included an unethical tax preparer named Phil who's shown talking with a young woman who's come for help with her taxes. Phil says to the young woman, “Leave it to me. I'll get your taxes in an O.K. place.” The young woman says, “What?” “Just as soon as my ‘audit’ is over,” he mumbles, “this gets my undivided attention.” The young woman looks around his office at some pictures of Phil in exotic locations and says somewhat suspiciously, “You take a lot of trips to the Caymans, Phil.” Phil says, “Pretty nice, huh?” Then he adds, “Oh, Phil's legally dead. Fell off a boat. Going by Dennis now . . . Dennis Celery. Long story.” Then as he pushes a piece of paper into a paper shredder he says, “Oh, you're not going to want to see this.” The commercial ends with the young woman standing to leave while she says, “I don't think this is going to work.”

The guy faked his own death. Did you catch that? Did you know that there are private investigators whose specialty is searching for people who've faked their death to collect a life insurance policy, or simply to start over.

Faking one's death is a risky thing in case you were wondering. One private investigator said that “People do a remarkably limited amount of planning when it comes to faking their own deaths. Faking your own death is a full-time job, and I can guarantee you that if you slip up with even the slightest sign of life, we'll find you.”

You may think it's bizarre that anyone would try to do such a thing. But I do believe that in other areas of life including the practice of our faith we're all on a continuum between faking it and making it.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote that we are to be dead to sin and alive to Christ. This is to say that Jesus calls us to begin a new life—not by faking our death, but by giving ourselves to a whole new way of living—a life of discipleship. This “new life” may be started via a major life change, a decision, or of the gradual type that's in need of renewal in your heart every day.

After last Sunday's message, we left Jesus and his disciples at Caesarea Philippi where Jesus reveals that he's the Son of the Living God, as Peter declared. And then, Jesus changes the subject. He tells them that the crowds will soon turn against him, he will be crucified, on the third day he will be raised from the dead. The disciples don't know what to make of all this. And Peter takes Jesus aside: “Never, Lord! That's never going to happen!”

Jesus' response to Simon Peter's as harsh as any words in the New Testament. “Get behind me Satan! You're not on the side of God but on human things.” And then he speaks some of the best known and most challenging words of his ministry, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

What does that mean for our lives? I believe Jesus is telling us how to begin a new life—not by faking our death—but by becoming one of his disciples. This is no minor thing. It's not some ceremony you go through. It's a new direction. He's

asking us to do several things first being that **we're to deny ourselves**. The word Jesus uses for this can also mean "to forget one's self." If I'm self-centered, "it's all about me." Hardly a thought is given to what other people are experiencing. Know anyone like that? The truth is that we're all like that to some extent.

But what if we could make a move towards "forgetting ourselves?" What if our thoughts weren't focused on us so much? And what if...we could surrender everything we have and are to God and His will? That's becoming a new person?

Now think of the whole maturation process we go through from childhood to adult life, and those who experience marriage, family, and children. You can't grow without becoming more focused on the needs of others can you?

Are we denying our self-centeredness and working towards becoming more giving in how we live? Or like Phil, the tax preparer who seemed to be just faking it?

**Jesus also calls us to take up our cross . . ."** What does it mean? **One thing it will mean for many of us is that we are called to give up our addiction to a life of comfort.** There's nothing comfortable about a cross. Thank God it's not a literal thing! I've read that the average cross in ancient times would have weighed around 300 pounds. That's a load. Of course it could be carried with the help of others.

But have you noticed how common it is for us to not want to leave their comfort zone. We tend to flee from things that require sacrifice. But it must be said that it is really hard to serve Christ and stay comfortable. There are so many around us

who are facing some tremendous challenges—loneliness, addiction, depression. Many are desperate and just barely holding it all together.

Someone said jokingly but it has truth in it, “When the going gets tough, everyone leaves.” That happened to Jesus. As the way got harder, the numbers of those who followed dwindled--until finally he died alone on Calvary. Yet, if he’d not been willing to die, would we ever have known how much God loves us!

But here’s the truth of the situation: if you and I don’t pick up the cross in our time--make those hard choices and assume those difficult responsibilities that come with ministry on Christ’s behalf, the message of God’s love will be lost.

How willing are we to do things that require the sacrifice of our time and resources? How far are we willing to go? When are we making it and when are we faking it?

And finally, Jesus said, “follow me.” **Following Jesus means living a life of loving service just as he did.** When we take up Jesus’ cross, we’re taking up his heart, his priorities, his values, his love. And we take up his driving ambition to share God’s love with the world.

Whatever we have to sacrifice, whatever we have to lay down in order to pick up his cross, we’ll do it. Then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you, and I, will truly discover a new life. Amen.