



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMON

## “The Gospel of Self Denial”

Scripture Lessons: *Isaiah 53:4-12; Mark 8:31-38*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr.  
on February 25, 2024, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church  
in Charleston, South Carolina.*

### **Isaiah 53:4-12**

#### **Who has believed what we have heard?**

<sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our infirmities

and carried our diseases,

yet we accounted him stricken,

struck down by God, and afflicted.

<sup>5</sup> But he was wounded for our transgressions,

crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the punishment that made us whole,

and by his bruises we are healed.

<sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray;

we have all turned to our own way,

and the LORD has laid on him

the iniquity of us all.

<sup>7</sup> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,

yet he did not open his mouth;

like a lamb that is led to the slaughter

and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,

so he did not open his mouth.

<sup>8</sup> By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living,

stricken for the transgression of my people.

<sup>9</sup> They made his grave with the wicked

and his tomb<sup>[c]</sup> with the rich,<sup>[d]</sup>

although he had done no violence,

and there was no deceit in his mouth.

<sup>10</sup> Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with affliction.

When you make his life an offering for sin,<sup>[e]</sup>

he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days;

through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

<sup>11</sup> Out of his anguish he shall see;  
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.

The righteous one,<sup>[f]</sup> my servant, shall make many righteous,  
and he shall bear their iniquities.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,  
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,  
because he poured out himself to death  
and was numbered with the transgressors,  
yet he bore the sin of many  
and made intercession for the transgressors.

### **Mark 8:31-38**

#### **Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection**

<sup>31</sup> Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any wish to come<sup>[a]</sup> after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> 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,<sup>[b]</sup> will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words<sup>[c]</sup> in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be

#### **The Gospel of Self-Denial**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born into an academically oriented family in 1906. His father was a doctor and taught at the University of Berlin.

It happened that academics suited the young Bonhoeffer as well, and he earned what would be his first doctorate when he was 21 years old. After that he moved to Barcelona, where he served briefly as a youth pastor, before moving to Berlin, earning his second doctorate, and serving for a time as a professor.

Bonhoeffer's mind was curious about theology and how one's understanding of God informed not only the individual but also one's larger culture. He was particularly interested in how the field of theology was developing here in the United States.

And so he moved to America and spent some time at Union Theological Seminary in New York. While

he was here he visited a number of churches.

In terms of theological development, I think it is safe to say that Bonhoeffer was not impressed at all, and though he may have been talking about a particular church when he said it, his words still sting - "There is no theology here," he said!

He was lecturing back in Berlin when the Nazis came to power. It wasn't long before Bonhoeffer lost his academic role. His books were banned, and it was around that time, when he was serving an underground Christian movement, that he wrote arguably his most famous book, *Life Together*.

In time, Bonhoeffer became involved in the resistance movement, and though it doesn't seem that he had a military or a strategic voice, he did have a theological one, an ethical one. He was more than privy to the conversations that ensued about assassinating Hitler!

When he was found out, he was arrested and taken from one concentration camp to another until he was hanged at the last one. He was 39 years old.

In another of his books, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer emphasized a profound but oft overlooked reality of the Christian life – an aspect that he lived quite personally – namely, that the Christian life is about self-denial. It is about putting our soul's delight, which is God – putting it before anything else –even our life!

John Calvin once said that "the sum of the Christian life is the denial of ourselves."

And while we might think that self-denial and sacrifice – the importance of risking and trusting in God / of being willing to give up everything to follow Jesus – we might think that these remain integral aspects of the Christian experience ... but sometimes they are more than a little bit soft-peddled.

We tend to look at the good, the grace ... forgetting that sin still prevails upon us and that our need for repentance and a right spirit endures as a daily calling upon our life.

Today we celebrate a baptism ... and while it is undoubtedly a joy / that God's love claims little Wilson long before he can respond in faith – there remains another reality / one that we don't always so quickly affirm...

And that is that our children – as sweet and as innocent as they are – they cannot escape the reality of sin – and so we baptize our children into future repentance and forgiveness, knowing that they, each in their own way, will need to learn what it means to yield their ambitions and their desires / to yield the expanse of their life to Jesus ... and it is a process. To be certain, it is a lifelong journey.

Randall Bridwell passed on Friday morning ... and a service to celebrate his life has been scheduled for this coming Friday at 3 o'clock. One of the things we say with great confidence when anyone joins the church triumphant, is that their baptism is now complete in their death.

Such an affirmation was made first by the Apostle Paul who declared, "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

The people in this morning's New Testament lesson had long-awaited the promised Messiah ... and they had no trouble gravitating toward the imagery of a shepherd / and a shoot from the stump of Jesse; indeed, the images of a mighty king loomed large in the consciousness of God's people, but what was largely overlooked were the images of sacrifice ... of denial / images of suffering and pain.

They didn't see coming, this Jesus who would gather around the table and say to his disciples, "This is my body, given for you."

We are different from this first audience in that we have the benefit of reading passages like the one we read today from Isaiah 53 – and we don't have any real problem understanding it as relating to the Messiah, because we have witnessed the cross!

We know that Jesus was wounded for our transgressions, that upon him was the punishment that made us whole. We know that like a lamb to the slaughter Jesus was silent ... how it was that he was cut off from the land of the living!

But the idea of a suffering servant, that had escaped the attention of the masses ... even the rabbis ... even Peter!

What Jesus was to go through was not an option ... Jesus said it himself, "The Son of Man 'must' undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

In other words, his mission was not optional...from day one. From day one Jesus knew that his role as Savior would take him to the cross!

Peter, who had just affirmed Jesus as the Messiah simply had no frame of reference for this, and so he rebukes Jesus.

In Peter's mind, Jesus was completely wrong in his assessment of what his Messianic Mission should entail ... and Peter was determined to set the record straight.

“Your life doesn’t have to involve sacrifice, Jesus! Stop all this talk about being rejected and dying – that’s not what you are about. That’s not what you came here to do!” (PAUSE)

Ah, to whatever specific rebuke Peter offered, Jesus responded by saying this: “Get behind me, Satan.” Now, Jesus wasn’t calling Peter Satan, but the rebuke that Peter had offered, it might as well have been spoken by the devil himself.

Remember what happened right after Jesus was baptized? The Holy Spirit descended upon him and then he was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil?

At the end of one of the Biblical accounts, the Bible says that the devil left Jesus until a more opportune time. And so we are left to wonder if this was that kind of time, a time for casting doubt, once again, on Jesus’ mission.

The nature of the temptation sounds familiar, doesn’t it. The tempter had suggested while in the wilderness that Jesus need not be hungry – turn the stones into bread / and the angels, they will protect you if you jump from the temple / and all the kingdoms of the world, I’ll give them to you. **You won’t have to work for it / you won’t have to die! Make it easy on yourself ... just bow down to me!**

Jesus, being completely self-aware knew that the only way for him to live a faithful life was for him to empty his life and take up the cross ... and he calls us to do the same. (PAUSE)

There is a cost to discipleship, and this is something Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew well, saying at another time: “Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is 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.” (PAUSE)

Everyone who lived when Jesus lived knew that when Rome issued its primary means of capital punishment (that being death on a cross) that they could, and often would, be called upon to carry it - carry their own cross! Not unlike Jesus did, until Simon of Cyrene came along and helped him by carrying it the rest of the way to Calvary’s hill.

Friends, the Christian life may, at times, look just like that – or it may look very different. However it looks, know this: carrying our cross and bearing the freight that comes from having yielded neither to the world nor to ourselves sometimes looks like weakness. It looks like sacrifice.

The old hymn considered the cross “a symbol of suffering and shame,” and it is!

This is a great paradox for us – that “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.”

Ah, to cherish that old rugged cross ... is to lay our trophies down / it is to lose the things that we think are important in order to gain the one thing that is most important.

Jesus put it like this: “What will it profit them to gain the whole world and to forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?” The answer is nothing!

Nothing is more important! Nothing else matters, if the soul that Jesus died to set free is compromised.

Our salvation is a gift from God, and it is something to be embraced – the gift and the sacrifice! To be certain, the greatness that we are called to undertake is accomplished by becoming, of all things, a servant – by becoming a person who seeks not rank or station, nor riches or praise, but rather the cross.

When Jesus comes in glory, that’s who he’s looking for – someone who has denied their wants and their desires and who has embraced the full breadth and scope of the mission and ministry of the one who lived – and died –and yet who also rose again!

Praise be to God, that Jesus’ is a victory over death in which we all share, but only when we deny ourselves – and by grace through faith – actually share in the ministry of our Savior.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.