

How to Find Your Life

Matthew 10:34-39

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin by thanking Greg for stepping in last Sunday while I was away for my quarterly Sunday away.

Greg has taken his place in the long (and not so honourable) Faith Questions tradition of me passing off difficult questions and difficult texts that I don't want to preach on to other people. 😊

Just kidding. In all seriousness, I appreciated Greg wrestling with Jesus' teaching on the sheep and the goats and doing so in a very thoughtful and challenging way.

We're on to our fourth of this year's questions. Again, there was a request for a sermon on a specific passage, Matthew 10:34-39, the one you just heard.

The part of this passage that the questioner was curious about was the part where Jesus says, "I have not come to bring peace but a sword." What's going on with that?

As a historical peace church, do we just skip past this inconvenient passage?

(Answer: well, kind of. At least if my sermon archives are to be believed! I've never touched this passage in seventeen years of preaching!)

Is this passage even *about* peace (many Mennonites seem to reliably get their theological antenna up whenever the word "peace" shows up)?

Does Jesus hate families? Is causing conflict and division the mark of a true Christian?

So, we'll see what we can make of this tricky passage. But I'm going to have to ask for your patience in advance. We're going to get there in a circuitous route, one that involves music and movies and novelists.

I suspect you're probably used to this from me by now. 😊

I am going to begin by making use of a reference from last Sunday's sermon. Greg quoted Bob Dylan's famous song, You Gotta Serve Someone.

This grabbed my attention because Naomi and I recently saw the movie on Bob Dylan's life that's out right now. It's called "A Complete Unknown," a line taken from one of his more famous songs "Like a Rolling Stone."

It's a pretty good movie. I didn't know much about Bob Dylan, and I've never been a huge fan of his music. But I gained a new appreciation for him in the film. I've even heard Dylan playing on Naomi's phone occasionally over the last few weeks!

The film only the early part of Dylan's career and left off, in many ways, before things started to get interesting, at least in his faith journey.

Dylan was born into a Jewish family in Minnesota. He seems to have been a more or less secular Jew until his conversion to Christianity in the late 1970s.

That's when he wrote the song that Greg quoted last Sunday, "You Gotta Serve Someone."

Bob Dylan is a kind of master lyricist, and his songs can read more like poems or essays than song lyrics (he's the only musician to ever win a Nobel Prize for Literature, in 2016).

I want to read a few lyrics from this song as a way into our topic and text today:

You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble; you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You might be a socialite with a long string of pearls

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the Devil, or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

Might be a rock 'n' roll addict prancing on the stage
You might have drugs at your command, women in a cage
You may be a businessman or some high-degree thief
They may call you doctor, or they may call you chief...

You may be a preacher preaching spiritual pride
Maybe a city councilman takin' bribes on the side
May be working in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair
You may be somebody's mistress, maybe somebody's heir...

Might like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk
Might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk
Might like to eat caviar, you might like to eat bread
May be sleeping on the floor, sleepin' in a king-size bed

But you're gonna have to serve somebody
Yes indeed, you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the Devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.¹

Dylan's point is obvious. No matter who you are—no matter your social status or occupation or moral standing, no matter how big your bank account is or isn't, no matter your temptations or your inability to resist them...

Every single one of us will bow down to something. As Greg said last week, nobody serves nothing.

This is as true for the most hardened atheist as it is for the most devout religious believer. To be human is to be a worshipper. Our only choice is what we will worship.

Among the more famous recent expressions of this is the late David Foster Wallace's commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005. Wallace was an American novelist, short story writer, essayist, and university professor of English and creative writing.

¹ <https://music.apple.com/ca/album/gotta-serve-somebody/181457864?i=181457865>

His most famous work is probably *Infinite Jest*, which is an enormous novel (over a thousand pages!). I've taken it out of the library a few times, but I've never actually read it (I'm full of good intentions!).

I'm going to quote his commencement address at length, because it's difficult to improve upon.

After an opening section where he talks about how we are kind of hard-wired to see ourselves as the center of the universe, he says this:

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. **There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.**

And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.

If you worship money and things — if they are where you tap real meaning in life — then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you.

On one level, we all know this stuff already — it's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up-front in daily consciousness.

Worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart — you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.

Look, the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful; it is that they are unconscious. They are default-settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing.

And the world will not discourage you from operating on your default-settings, because the world of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and **the worship of self** [more on that later]. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it.

But of course, there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of winning and achieving and displaying. The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default-setting, the “rat race” — the constant gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing.²

I think David Foster Wallace is absolutely right. If we worship power, money, things, drugs, alcohol, sex, body image, entertainment, comfort—these things will eat us alive. We see evidence of this all around us every day.

Because this is not what we were made for. We were made to worship the Lord of heaven and earth, the Creator of all, the God whose character and kingdom have come near in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In a sad twist, three years after delivering this remarkable, oft-quoted commencement address, David Foster Wallace died by suicide at age 46 after struggling with depression, alcoholism, and drug addiction for many years.

Bob Dylan is right: You gotta serve somebody. Who will we serve?

David Foster Wallace is right: Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.

² <https://mbird.com/literature/more-david-foster-wallace-quotes/>

Both artists are reflecting a deep truth about what it means to be human. A deep truth that Jesus addressed many years earlier.

Our text today is hard, in some ways. Jesus says some difficult things about hating members of our own family, about not coming to bring peace but a sword, etc.

But ultimately, this is a passage about allegiance, about who we will serve, who we will love above all, who we will worship.

And it's about how to find a life worth living.

Jesus words about not coming to bring peace but a sword do not contradict his teaching about peace elsewhere.

He is actually quoting the prophet Micah (7:6), who prophesied in the context of exile and judgment. The people were on a path that would lead to destruction, Micah said. Injustice and idolatry were running rampant. God's judgement was coming.

And when God acts to correct and reroute his people, it leads to division. N.T. Wright puts it like this:

When God acts to rescue his people, there are always some who declare that they don't need rescuing, that they are comfortable as they are. Part of the reason for [Jesus] quoting this passage here is to say: don't be surprised if this happens now; this, too, is part of your tradition! Your own scriptures contain warnings about the great disruptions that will happen when God finally acts once and for all to save you.³

Jesus is making a connection to his people's past. He is not saying that he enjoys division or is against family or that the path of discipleship relishes conflict.

He is simply saying that divisions between people will be inevitable when his kingdom breaks into the world.

³ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One* (London: SPCK, 2002), 123.

When Jesus says he has not come to bring peace but a sword he is not advocating violence or making a statement about war. He is simply pointing out the obvious: the Christian commitment to the upside-down kingdom will not sit well with everyone.

It will divide people, sometimes even families.

Speaking of families, I think it's worth reminding ourselves again that Jesus is not *against* family loyalties. This is the same Jesus, after all, who told the story of the lost sons.

I think that in this context Jesus is, again, drilling down into the question of allegiance and worship.

In the ancient world, family served as a primary identity marker, perhaps in a way that is unfamiliar to us today. Family identity was everything. This is why genealogies are so important in the bible. Who you are is defined by your lineage.

This is the context into which Jesus says,

Those who love father or mother more than me aren't worthy of me. Those who love son or daughter more than me aren't worthy of me.³⁸ Those who don't pick up their crosses and follow me aren't worthy of me.

This sounds harsh. And it is. Jesus is saying that anything that we anchor our identities in other than him—even our family—is a dead end.

Our temptation is likely not to locate our identities in our family, at least not in the same way as in Jesus' time.

In our time, the far greater temptation is to anchor our identities in our selves (as Wallace alluded to twenty years ago, and which has only gotten worse).

We are trained in countless ways to believe the lie that we can be self-creators, that our identities are things that we are obliged to fashion on our own, that we must carve out some special corner of the universe (or the internet) where we are acknowledged as wonderfully unique and different.

Race, sexuality, gender, mental health diagnoses, occupation, body image, consumer preferences, spiritualities, our politics, our moralities, curated online profiles... all these and more are pressed into the service of constructing our personal identities.

Each of these areas can tell some part of our story, but they cannot bear the weight of meaning that so many in our culture demand of them.

I am convinced that identity is, in many ways, the idol of our time. And it is having devastating effects. We are weaponizing our identities against one another. And, particularly for the young, this is laying waste to the mental health of a generation.

We were not created to be self-creators, self-worshippers. And the attempt to do so is eating many people alive.

Christians who say no to all this—in what we say and in how we live—will cause division. Nobody likes to have their idols challenged, after all.

But it is not just about what we say “no” to. Our “no” to the idols of our time must be accompanied by a deeper “yes.” “Yes” to Jesus and to his cross.

Those who don’t pick up their crosses and follow me aren’t worthy of me.

Again, this sounds harsh. And it is.

Paradoxically, Jesus says this is how we will find our lives. This is the only secure foundation for us to ground our lives and to give us meaning that will not fade away.

Our true identity is cruciform. Cross-shaped.

It is a symbolic dying to self and rising to life in emulation of One who showed us that what it means to be a human being is to love God and neighbour in the costliest of ways, the One who laid down his life for his friends *and* his enemies.

The central Christian themes are of dying to self and living to Christ as a path to true freedom and stable identity.

Bob Dylan was right. We do have to serve somebody. It may be the Devil and any of his many temptations. Or it may be the Lord.

David Foster Wallace was right. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And if we worship lesser things, we will be eaten alive.

Jesus was right. Love for him must come before all other loves. The way to find our life is to lose it in service to him and his kingdom, to die to self and to live for Christ.

May God help us to serve and to worship truly. May God lead us into the deep truth that the way to find our life is to lose it.

Amen.

