

## **Matthew 26:47-56**

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.' At once he came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. 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. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?' At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.' Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

## **Philippians 4:4-9**

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

### **Discipline: How Do We Find It Once We've Lost It?**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

**March 22, 2009**

The Children's Sermon just a little bit ago tried to make the point that the way to defeat an enemy is to make them your friend. A little boy in the middle of that crowd looked at me and said, "I never thought of that before."

Some of you may wonder where the signs went. We had some signs that were taped, with tape that wouldn't pull the varnish off, up on the walls there. I was here during the Drake University concert, I'm sitting way back in the back and I looked at that, and I thought it looked tacky, and since it was my idea, I took them down.

It's interesting how it happens, and it happens, we lost it. On a basketball court, when they guard you a little tight, and you swing an elbow and aim for the septum with the hope of deviation, sometimes you let a basketball go straight at their head and say

“Whoops.” At the grocery store, when the shoppers’ carts come to gridlock and you aim your cart at the Achilles heel of the one who beat you to the last good banana. When the numbers drop and the pie chart shrinks and the line plummets down, and the bank passes out popcorn with a note that says, “Thanks for popping in,” and you begin to wonder what’s going on with the bank. Someone tells you what you don’t want to hear, so you just walk away, so you just don’t have to listen.

We freeze up with fear, and we fight hard with fury. It’s a reaction to the same thing. We lose it, and sometimes the way in which we lose it is to back away, run away, and sometimes the way in which we lose it is to attack. We’re not sure, always, why we do it, but we do. Sometimes we lose it, I mean, we just lose it. I’ve seen people lose it. I’ve been the cause of people losing it. I have lost it. Maybe we’re alone and nobody saw us lose it. Maybe we’re in our car, and we think they didn’t see us lose it, or if they saw it, they didn’t now we were losing it. And in those words from Philippians. Help us find it when it’s lost. Whatever is honorable, or just, or pure, or lovely, or gracious. If there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things.

If we’re to have discipline in our lives, we’re going to have to learn to deal with two basic impulses. First is the impulse to fight, second is the impulse to flight. If there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, we can think on those things. Otherwise, it’s lost. So quickly it happens, something is said, something is done, some injustice, some errant word, and we’ll want to fight about it. Frederick Buechner understood. He wrote of the deadly sins, “Anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

Mark Trotter, pastor at First Church in San Diego for years, he was counseling a couple, and they had worked through some things, and he had come to the point that he knew had made mistakes, and he asked to be forgiven. He was sad and sorry, and Mark believed him, and he looked to her, and he said, “Now, will you forgive him?” And she said, “No.” And Mark said, “Why not?” And she said, “Because he hasn’t suffered enough yet.” She enjoyed the fight. She might have been right, I don’t know.

In a safari park in Kenya, the African nation, in the park there is a sign. It says, “Visitors who throw litter into the crocodile pit will be asked to retrieve it.” What we throw at the crocodiles, we’ve got to go get. When we live to make someone suffer, we suffer ourselves, but we don’t always know it. When we savor to the last toothsome morsel of the pain we’re giving back, the skeleton at the feast is us. It isn’t a very nice picture, when we think about it. Three years they were together, three years with lots of time to think, lots of time to talk. Words were spoken, powerful words, so powerful that a lot of those words are remembered down to this day. If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek. Love your enemy. Pray for those who persecute you. Blessed are the meek. And then, when it really counted, do you see what happened?

They came to arrest Jesus. Judas had betrayed him with a kiss. He had betrayed them all with a kiss, and that sort of got them angry. The soldiers came, and they started to take him away, and this one who preached about plowshares and pruning hooks and turning swords into plowshares, this one who preached about peace, who would rather be called the Prince of Peace than the King of Kings. One of his disciples lost it. The impulse to fight - took out a sword, cut off the ear of a servant of the guard. He lost it, and an innocent man cut off an ear. I think whenever there is a fight, innocent people get hurt. And whenever someone fights, it is the first thing to go, is hearing. When there is no hearing, there will be little use of speaking, because no one is listening. And Jesus said, "Put your sword back. Don't you know, if you live by the sword, you're going to die by the sword?" And he shook his head, and he must have wondered, and perhaps this was the first time, but not the last, that he said it, "Forgive them, God, they don't know what they're doing." The impulse to fight, the fun of the fight, to find the villain, to label them, to name them evil, to hurt them... That's not looking for excellence. That's not finding something worthy of praise, and thinking on those things. Forgive them, forgive us, sometimes we know not what we do.

Unfortunate as that was, it got worse. The other impulse locked in. It's fear, you know. The opposite of love, you see. Perfect love casts out fear, always has. The impulse to flight. The impulse to fear. When Jesus was arrested, his friends took flight. They ran. They were afraid. We lose it sometimes. We take flight. There's a lot we'd want to think about running from today, a lot we'd want to think about running from today. Next Sunday, you come to church, our district superintendent Eric Smith's going to be preaching here next Sunday. When he was presented to the clergy for the vote for his ordination, I was the chair of the group that recommended him, and he and the others were to give a three-minute speech on the problems of the church, and I told the candidates to keep their speech to three minutes, and if by chance they saw me moving close to where they were, it was not because I was enamored by their speech, I was trying to close it down, and if they went beyond three minutes to four, I would vote against them. Eric went over his time. He was saying that the church will face major problems in the next few years, and he extolled on and on about war and poverty and injustice. Tears in my eyes, but I moved closer to him. And then he stopped. And he looked at me, and he said, "and environmental pollution." And everybody laughed, and when the vote was taken, it was 300 to 1.

There is much to run from. Two men talking about their problems while working out in a health club. One of them said to the other, "It's just about the time you learn to handle stress, by taking the problems, everything you have, with a grain of salt, then you go to a doctor who puts you on a salt-free diet." We're apt to be a little like the politician who said to the reporter, "I think that the number one problem in this country is that no one is willing to take responsibility for anything - but don't quote me on that."

And the disciples ran away, they lost it, they took flight. What a sad story. After three years watching Jesus show them that there was nothing to fear, that cannot be faced with love. After three years modeling what it is to say what had to be said to the people who needed to hear it. To the money changers, "You made God's house a den of robbers." To

the lawyers who cheated people, “You put burdens on people and you don’t lift a single finger to the religious establishment, you remind me of whitewashed tombstones, you’re all corrupt inside, but you look lovely on the outside.” After three years of speaking of God as “I am that I am,” and helping them understand that God is a presence that will be there when they need. God is Abba, loving parent. That death has no victory, we don’t need to run from people who frighten us, we need to get to know them. We don’t need to be afraid of the hard times, we need to stand together and make the hard times better. We don’t need to run. We don’t need to take flight. But the disciples lost it. They took flight, and I can imagine that being the second time Jesus said to himself, “Forgive them, God, they don’t know what they do.” And furthermore, they don’t know what they could do if they stayed on task. Why, they could build the church. They could be the rock on which the foundation is built.

Being Methodist has its advantages, but it has its drawbacks. It won’t keep us from sinning, but it’s apt to keep us from enjoying it much. Wesley had this idea that we have charge of our lives, that we can make decisions, that we can move on to perfection. Much, therefore, is asked of us. Much is expected. Fight or flight. Always, there’s a choice. Always.

Jared Diamond wrote a book on how societies choose to fail or succeed. It’s his contention that we have the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of distant and past peoples, that it’s an opportunity no past society has enjoyed to such a degree, because of the knowledge revolution. And Jan Waterman adds her thoughts. She said we are not in charge of the way life unfolds or the experiences we encounter, but we are in charge, she writes, of our responses. In times of crisis, do we abandon our values, or do we use them? Every choice we make, she says, is a creative act of spiritual power. We can see it now, we can read it in newspapers, we can hear it on talk radio. There are people who want to find someone to fight. There has to be an enemy. Maybe it’s Islam. We’ve had people here at the church, coming in to tell us, so convinced that people of the Islamic faith tradition are to be feared, so afraid they are, they will not confront the Islamic community with their concerns, so fearful of the future that they expect a fight, that in their belligerence, I think they’re working to create it.

You want to fight? Maybe it’s the past administration and their lack of oversight. Or the present leaders and their social engineering. Maybe it’s investment brokers, or those bankers with the big bonuses. There’s got to be an enemy. There’s got to be someone to fight. Maybe it’s Iran, or North Korea. Someone to hate. Someone to blame. And Jesus worries we’re going to cut off an ear, and then no one can hear. And Jesus says to us, “Put away your swords.” If you live by the sword, you die. Others in full flight, running scared, getting away. Sell your stock. Buy gold. Bury it in the ground. Worried about the future. Get a gun. Find some bullets. Buy up seed that hasn’t been irradiated. Look for the pandemic to take over the world. See the worst. Help build up an atmosphere of panic and fear and flight. Walling up in a hole, waiting for the end, protecting against the horde. Fearing the worst. Flight from the world. There won’t be enough food to eat, so we’ve got to be sure we got ours. There won’t be enough water to drink. Survival of the fittest.

But Loren Eiseley is right, the human race has survived not because we're tough. We're not. The human race has survived because we're tender. The human race can face any problem, can find any solution. People working together can build prayer to help those with grief, can build a Habitat house.... We can do it, we can face it, we are able. We can see the light and follow it. We have withstood the ravages of nature and the destructiveness of war because we follow the light of the values that lead us to love. Humans will evolve in the world because we will transform the world. In transforming it, we will evolve. For those who want to build up barricades to hide from the masses, let our Christian values call the multitudes together to build the future. For those who want to purchase weapons for personal protection, let us take a look at the real enemy, which is fear itself in the soul.

We will find God above us, but we will find God within. And we don't need to wonder where there is hope, because hope is in the human soul, infused by God, and for us inspired by Christ. Gandhi called it *ahimsa*, non-violence, and through that he saw God face to face. The Dalai Lama tells about a life of compassionate action at the center of Buddhist faith it is. And Fahzir Rama, an Islamic scholar, is convinced that the Koran insists on divine guidance, that it is come to all people. All people. There's light out there. Christianity has a glimpse of it, other faiths as well. The light gives us confidence in what we can do together, the light urges us to find the discipline so that we can do what we can, not to have to fight to win, not to have to take flight in fear. The light can be seen in the faces of people, especially those who are strange to us, new to us, and different from us. The light we follow, the light in our church.

What about our church? When you count the wider mission giving a hundred and thirty thousand dollars from this church, beyond the walls of this church, when you add the money that we give to the battered women's shelter and the program for young people in foster homes, twenty-some thousand dollars, when you look at our outreach budget, well over half of our program money here at this church goes to causes beyond this church. And I haven't even mentioned the Habitat program, of the Great Hour of Sharing, or the Native American ministry, or Guatemala. The time has come to realize who we are and what we can do, and to listen to the voices that speak words of hope and possibility. The time has come to follow the light and come out of the darkness, because the God we worship is not a distant concept but a present reality within the human heart, and it's waiting for us to awaken. Because there are things worthy of praise. Because there is much that is excellent. And when we think on these things, when we think on the light, when we want to fight or take flight, we develop the discipline. And Jesus looks at us and how we use the values he taught, and he says, "O God, be with them. They know exactly what they're doing."