

Denial

Matthew 16:20-28

August 30, 2020



The Rev. A. David Paul

*Calvin Presbyterian Church
Zelienople, Pennsylvania
www.calvinchurchzelie.org*

This morning without a cloud in the sky an hour before the sun rose, you know when the sky is lit up so majestically that if captured it in a painting it would look fake I saw Venus shining like the brightest star in the night sky. Next to Jen or our kids lying in bed snug as a bug in a rug, it was one of the most beautiful things I've seen recently in all God's good creation. I don't know, I just think there's a primal connection in us with creation that we under appreciate. I wanted to share with you this morning that too often we miss the little things they really are the foundational things, aren't they?

For more than a decade Sam operated a successful counseling business in a mid-sized industrial city.¹ His contracts were with major corporations which had brought growth and progress to the area. The counseling center offered a variety of services, but most clients wanted help with a drinking problem.

The center's contract with each corporation enabled employees to seek help with a guarantee of anonymity. Each employee's problems and progress were treated as completely confidential, and it was well known that client files were for the eyes of the counseling staff only.

One day the executive vice president of the largest firm under contract made an appointment to meet with Sam. To Sam's shock and amazement, this executive demanded to see the files for his employees. Sam told him politely but firmly that this was impossible. The files were completely confidential.

The vice president's face became red, and he spoke loudly and harshly to Sam as he repeatedly insisted that the files about his employees be delivered to him immediately. Sam continued to refuse.

Finally, the vice president stood up and moved toward the door. As he touched the doorknob, he turned around, paused, and stared at Sam. ***"Very well. Since you insist, tomorrow our legal department will contact you to terminate our contract with you immediately. How many of our employees do you suppose have availed themselves of your services? More than a hundred?"***

Sam again reminded him that this was confidential information. ***"No matter. You won't be seeing them anymore, unless you give me their files right now, and I mean right now."***

Sam had a vision of his counseling practice collapsing like a building demolished by explosives. He pictured his own personal finances reduced to rubble. Then he addressed the executive in as measured a voice as he could muster. ***"Dick, how many times do I have to tell you? It can't be done. It just can't be done. My center's work with your employees is completely confidential. Cancel the contract if you must, but you'll never get those files. Never!"***

The vice president walked back and took his seat again. ***"Okay,"*** he said, in a subdued voice. ***"If that's the way it is, then I guess it's safe to tell you why I came. I have a drinking problem, and I need your help."***

When Sam uttered his final refusal of the vice president's demand, he knew he was stepping into a kind of death. It was a death freely chosen, one that followed from all that he was as a professional, a counselor, a human being, a man of God.

When he uttered that final refusal, he gave up his life as he knew it, trusting that somehow God would be there on the other side. Sam had no idea what the next minutes held for him.



In the language of today's lectionary Gospel, for a decade Sam had disciplined himself to NOT break confidentiality, so when he was thrown off balance when his integrity was REALLY tested, when his life's work was threatened, without even thinking he DENIED HIMSELF.

Wait. Let me ask you:

Did he deny himself,

or did he discover himself?

Did he deny breaking confidentiality,

or did he embrace the integrity of keeping it?

Did he deny taking the easy way that most take,

or did he embrace the more difficult way?

Did he deny who the world was threatening to make him be,

or did he embrace who God created him to be?

I'm not just trying to look at this familiar scripture from a different angle. I didn't just read this is some commentary or preaching article, or watch it on some YouTube sermon, or listen to it on some homiletics podcast. I'm not just trying to put a positive spin on this. I think this is imperative! I believe this is the missing link for our modern sensibilities! While this is about denial of our worldly selves, we could just as accurately say, this is about fully embracing who God made us to be.

There's a funny commercial from the early 2000's that I think this makes a foundational point. It was funny because it was for Lending Tree, who of course wants to get you to borrow more money. Nonetheless, it features a guy named Stanley Johnson who appeared to be living the good life. Stanley had the big house, a country club membership, a pool and even a brand new car. When asked how he does it, Stanley responds with a contrived smile, *"I'm in debt up to my eyeballs."*

The way of the world is to buy things we don't need, with money we don't have, to impress perfect people who don't exist. It's like being nibbled to death by ducks or eaten to the bone by nats. It's a million little things that lead us astray, that pull us off the way and lead to us being spiritually, physically, mentally impoverished, malnourished and within an eyelash of death. It happens so subtly we don't even notice.

One of the most critical mistakes the church of old made was to present Christianity as something that was easy, a bargain no sane person would turn down. Yes, God's grace comes to us for free and is undeserved, but there is nothing easy about it especially when the weight of the world is pushing in on you.

Sam's story shows us that there are pivotal moments when we must decide whether or not we fully embrace who God created us to be. For some of us those are moments, for others of us the choice is less dramatic, less identifiable, but no less real, no less important, no less life transforming. Sam heard it in the threats of an irate executive VP. And he practiced his response for at least a decade.

Friends, where do you hear the foundations of who God made you to be being threatened? How do you practice your response? I ask because every time you do you are affirming who God made you to be. Every time you do, you are getting stronger and more resilient and wiser. I ask because every time you do you get closer to becoming precisely who God made you to be. And that my friends, is one of, if not the most beautiful things in all of God's good creation.

Amen?!

¹ Carl P. Daw, Jr., ed., *"Breaking the Word: Essays on the Liturgical Dimensions of Preaching"* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1994), pp. 142-43

