



March 3, 2019

Why Jesus? Because Jesus is Love.  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

**Matthew 16:24-17:1-8 NRSV**

<sup>24</sup>Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup>For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

<sup>27</sup>"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. <sup>28</sup>Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

**17** Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>5</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." <sup>8</sup>And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

We all have defining moments in life. So says a new book by brothers Chip and Dan Heath. It's called *The Power of Moments*. According to Chip and Dan, these are moments we remember. They encourage us to view our lives - not simply as the endless passing of weeks and months and years; not only as a job to do with goals and tasks to accomplish; not even as a list of friends that we've met and embraced. Rather, they encourage us to focus on the moments we've encountered along the way. And they argue that a few of those moments have had an extraordinary impact.

I'm guessing you could pinpoint some of those moments for yourself: a new teacher who spotted a talent that you didn't know you had; a chance encounter



with someone who became the love of your life; a sudden loss that upended the certainties you feel; a realization that you didn't want to spend one more day in your job. Chip and Dan write: "These are defining moments. They shape our lives. Sometimes they happen by chance, and sometimes they are the product of our own making. But all of them endure in our memories, and add meaning and significance to our days."

To illustrate their point, they share the story of Chris Barbic and Donald Kamentz. A few years ago these two were working in education in Houston, Texas. They had started a charter school. One night they were watching sports on ESPN. The station was previewing the upcoming National Signing Day. The coverage was exuberant. Something struck Kamentz. "It blows my mind that we celebrate athletics this way," he said, "but we don't have anything that celebrates academics in the same way." Here, the students at their charter school were primarily kids from low-income, Hispanic families. They deserved celebrating. Many of these students would be the first in their families to graduate from high school.

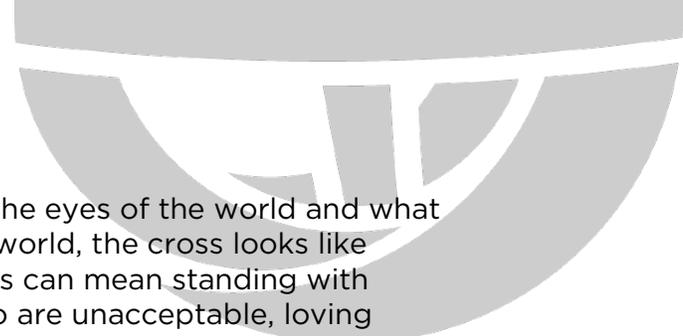
Suddenly Barbic and Kamentz had an epiphany. *What if we created our own "Signing Day" when our students would announce where they would go to college?* One wide-eyed idea led to another. A few months later they had their very first Senior Signing Day. They treated graduating seniors with the same adulation as college athletes. The first year they tried it, roughly 450 people crammed into a community center next door to the school. Seventeen graduating seniors and their families attended.

Barbic was struck by the emotion of the event. It hit home—the sacrifices everybody had to make for their kids to get there. No one did it alone. Would you believe that by 2010, six years later, the senior class in their little school had grown to 126 graduates, and Senior Signing Day had expanded so much that it had to be moved to the basketball arena at Rice University? 5000 people were there. And 90% of the graduates were the first members of their families to go to college.

We all have defining moments in life. Sometimes they happen by chance and sometimes they are the product of our own making. In our scripture reading for today, Jesus has a defining moment too, and so do Peter, James, and John. Jesus has traveled with his followers to a mountain in Galilee. They've been together for several months now. Jesus – the little boy of Mary and Joseph – is all grown up. He has called disciples, preached to the crowds, healed the sick, fed the hungry, and even stilled a very scary storm. So now what? There seems to be an increasing urgency to his efforts. For the second time in a few weeks, Jesus tells his disciples that if they want to continue to be his followers, they're going to need to take up a cross. When he says this, I can imagine them scratching their heads and maybe even shaking in their boots. *What's he talking about? Where are we going? And how are we supposed to get there?*



Keep in mind, the Gospel of Matthew was written several decades after these events took place. We the readers have the benefit of hindsight. We're being asked to take up a cross – just like Jesus did. It doesn't sound easy. There's a



sharp difference between what the cross means in the eyes of the world and what it means in the kingdom of God. In the eyes of the world, the cross looks like failure and loss and death. In the kingdom, the cross can mean standing with those who are weak, opening the door to those who are unacceptable, loving those who aren't very lovable.

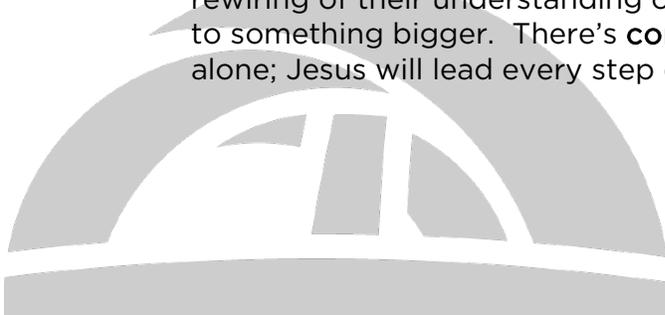
Lest we think Jesus' words are purely hypothetical, keep in mind that the community to which Matthew writes has either just been kicked out of the synagogue or they simply left it. They're struggling greatly to find a way forward. *Are they on the right track? Are they still faithful Jews? Was Jesus truly God's promised Messiah?* Now - at a key moment in their lives - Matthew reminds them of some hard words Jesus shared with his closest followers. Jesus is asking them - and us: "Are you willing to carry a cross? Are you able to play second fiddle? Are you open to being labeled a loser?" Clearly, carrying a cross counts in the kingdom of God. It's a life devoted to things like soothing the pain of the sick, caring for children in need, hammering nails in houses for those without shelter.

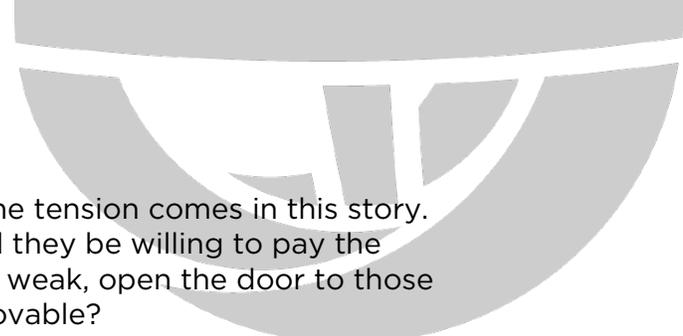
To demonstrate the seriousness of his words, Jesus takes three of his disciples - Peter, James, and John - and heads up a mountain. It's a defining moment. A curtain is pulled back. Suddenly Jesus' face is shining as bright as the sun and his clothes are dazzling white. *Who is this guy?* Then Moses and Elijah appear. Their presence assures the disciples that this new kid on the block is merely continuing the tradition of the Law and the Prophets. And even more than that, something of the very glory of God seems to be present in what he says and does.

Here's a question for you: Do you think Jesus himself is changed in that moment? Or is it Peter, James, and John who are changed? In other words, are they finally able to see who Jesus really is and why he has come - to show them the very heart of God. To be honest, I'm not sure who is changed. Maybe both. But from the disciples' perspective, I can't help but feel that this moment is defining in their walk with Jesus, and it empowers them in taking up their cross.

Here's another question: How are we supposed to know if something is a defining moment for us? We often need the benefit of hindsight. The Heath brothers identify 4 elements to help us. First, there's **elevation** - defining moments rise above the ordinary. Second, there's **insight** - defining moments rewire our understanding of ourselves and our world. Third, there's **connection** - defining moments tend to be social: weddings, graduations, baptisms. Our moments are enriched because we share them with others. And fourth, there's **pride** - defining moments capture us at our best; we have moments of achievement, moments of courage.

With these 4 elements in mind, the transfiguration of Jesus sounds less like a change in Jesus himself, and more like a change in Peter, James, and John. There's **elevation**...they rise far above their lives as ordinary fishermen. There's **insight**...a rewiring of their understanding of themselves and their world; Jesus is calling them to something bigger. There's **connection**...they won't be carrying their crosses alone; Jesus will lead every step of the way. The trickiest element to pinpoint is





**pride**...capturing them at their best. That's where the tension comes in this story. Would they be able to carry a cross or not? Would they be willing to pay the price or not? Would they stand with those who are weak, open the door to those who are unacceptable, love those who aren't very lovable?

We all have defining moments. Elevation. Insight. Connection. Pride. Churches have them too. Back in 1969 Zumbro made a move from the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 4<sup>th</sup> Street down to our present location. Now, 50 years later, we're talking about making some updates. We're still in the planning stages. Keep praying and stay tuned. This is a potentially defining moment.

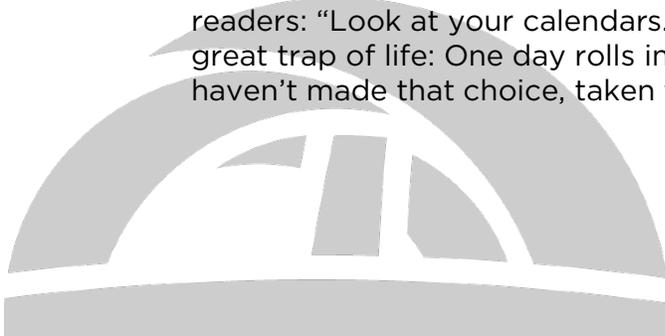
Another church story. This past week the United Methodist Church wrestled with an important issue in St. Louis: what do we do about clergy and couples who are LGBTQ? The majority of American churches favored "The One Church Plan." This would have allowed individual churches and conferences to decide whether to ordain and marry gay and lesbian members. It felt like a critical compromise. But it didn't pass. Adam Hamilton, a Methodist pastor in Kansas City, wrote: "We are continuing to treat our gay and lesbian members like second class citizens. We have to find a better way to love each other." This was a defining moment for the Methodist, but in my opinion, not in a good way.

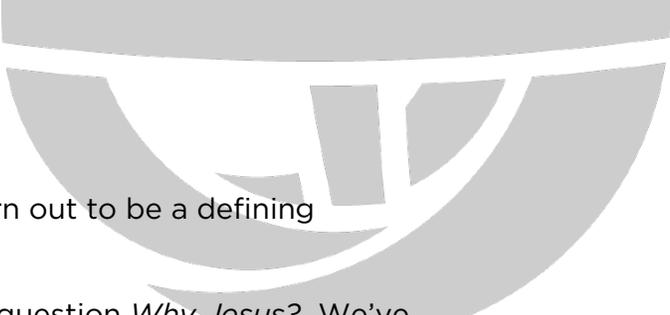
We all have defining moments. Eugene O'Kelly has a moving memoir called *Chasing Daylight*. He started writing it shortly after getting some tough news from his doctor. This is how he began: "I was blessed. I was told I had three months to live."

In May of 2005 O'Kelley was informed that he had three malignant tumors in his brain, and there was no cure. He was 53 years old, married, and the father of two daughters. "All the plans that Corinne and I had made for our future had to be junked," he said. Within a couple of weeks, he resigned from his job. And he started making other plans.

One night at the dining room table, he drew five concentric circles. It was a map of his relationships. His family was in the center circle, and in the outer ring were more distant relationships, such as business partners. He resolved to unwind his relationships - in his words, "to beautifully resolve them" - and to work systematically from the outer circle toward the center."

There were lots of great conversations along the way, plenty of opportunities to say thank you for good friendships. When O'Kelley got to the center, he told his mother he would see her in heaven, and she seemed comforted by that. The he shared with his wife: "You're going to have to take over now. I've done all I can do." Two weeks later he was gone. But before that day, he wrote: "I've experienced more Perfect Moments in two weeks than I had in the last five years. I was blessed. I was told I had three months to live." O'Kelley challenges his readers: "Look at your calendars. Make time for the important stuff. This is the great trap of life: One day rolls into the next, and a year goes by, and we still haven't made that choice, taken that trip, had that conversation we always meant





to have. Have it now,” O’Kelley urges us. “It may turn out to be a defining moment.”

Over the season of Epiphany we’ve been asking the question *Why Jesus?* We’ve explored answers like: *Because Jesus is Light; Because Jesus is Blessing; Because Jesus Sees the Possibilities.* Perhaps all these answers boil down to this: *Why Jesus? Because he shows us the very heart of God. Because Jesus is Love.*

Friends, if you’re looking for elevation in life, or insight, or connection, or even pride, try taking up a cross and following Jesus. And then – like Eugene O’Kelley, like Chris Barbic and Donald Kamentz, like Peter, James and John – be willing to go wherever love takes you. Amen.

