

Tear Down the Walls!  
Matthew 16:21-28  
Preached at Edgewood UMC, Fargo ND  
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Jesus tells his followers;  
    “those who want to save their life will lose it,  
    and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”  
This is such a central part of Jesus’ message  
    that it is one of the very few Jesus sayings that’s in all four gospels.

Jesus says that when we try to make our lives secure  
    when we try to make them safe  
        we will lose our lives –  
            the very thing we are trying to protect.  
The outcome/result is losing one’s life,  
    and we get there by trying to make our lives safe and secure.  
What a strange thing this is!

And then he tells us that it is when we lose our lives  
    that we actually find and keep our lives.  
        The outcome is finding our lives  
            and we get there by losing our lives  
What a strange thing this is!

This doesn’t seem to make any sense.  
    We go to school  
    We work hard  
    We obey laws  
        We do all this to try to have safe and secure lives  
        And Jesus says this is not enough . . .  
            and this will not really give us life.

What is going on here?

Well, it’s a lot clearer in the Greek than it is in English  
    and this is one of the hazards of translating from one language to another  
        sometimes core concepts get lost . . .  
            and that is what happens here.

The Greek word that is translated here in English as “life” – *psyche* –  
    is the Greek word for “soul”  
And the Greek phrase that is translated here in English as  
    “make secure” or “seek to gain”

is a Greek phrase that means “to build a hedge, wall, or barrier around”

So the first line becomes:

“Whoever seeks to build a wall around their soul shall destroy it”

The Greek phrase that is translated here in English as

“lose life”

is a Greek phrase that means

“to destroy or actively tear down”

And the Greek phrase that is translated here in English as

“keep life” or “preserve life”

is a Greek phrase that means

“bring to a living birth”

So the second line becomes:

“Whoever tears down the wall (around their soul)  
shall bring their soul to a living birth”

Now, if we look at this again

with closer translations of the Greek,

we hear Jesus saying:

“Whoever seeks to build a wall around their soul shall destroy it;  
whoever tears down the wall (around their soul) shall bring their soul to a living birth”

And the questions become:

How do we build walls around our souls?

How do we try to play it “safe”?

How do we try to protect ourselves so that we are not available to God?

Jesus says this will destroy us,

So then we need to live into the second part of Jesus’ statement

and its implicit question:

How do we tear down, or break down,

the walls we put up around our souls –

the walls that keep God

who often comes in the guise of others –

the walls that keep God out?

Often we put up walls by saying

This is right, and this is wrong

This is in, and this is out

This person is in, and this person is out.

Life seems so much safer and clearer this way.

And because it seems that this is the way to navigate life,

over and over,

Jesus has to re-educate his followers – including us -- about this.

Because God doesn't go by that kind of arithmetic at all –  
God's "new math" is a math called "grace."

A wise man named Clarence Jordan put it this way:

God doesn't go by the kind of arithmetic that you and I go by.

God has never learned to deal in fractions.

God didn't get that far in school.

I think he's like my father who had ten children, and many a time I thought,  
'Well, my goodness, with a family this big, Daddy can't love me very much.  
I can only claim one tenth of his love.'

But my father loved me with all of his love.

It's just that way with love.

There is no fraction in it.

You can't break it up into pieces.

And God wants the whole human race.

He just can't deal in fractions.

And so Jesus is saying to these people  
who were griping and mumbling and grumbling  
about the fact that he was taking in all kinds of people,  
bums and drunks and the poor folks and everybody,  
he was saying,  
'Well, I just can't help it.  
God just has a sentimental attachment for his people.  
And, whether you like it or not, God loves 'em,  
and it does seem to me that if they're precious in God's sight,  
they ought to be precious in yours, too.'

Clarence Jordan knew a lot about living into this kind of inclusion

And recognizing that each and every person --

whatever their life or condition

is made in the image of God –

just as they are now

& just as we are now

not as they are going to be at some future time

& not as we are going to be at some future time

NO!

Just exactly as they are now

& just exactly as we are now

And each and every person --

whatever their life or condition --

is precious in God's sight.

Clarence Jordan (pronounced “jer-den”),  
 He had two Ph.D’s – one in agriculture and one in Greek  
 He was a pastor and a professor.  
 Many prestigious positions were offered to him  
 and he turned them all down.  
 He wanted to use his knowledge  
 “to seek to conserve the soil, God’s holy earth”  
 and to help his neighbors:  
     these were black sharecroppers and tenant farmers.

You see, he understood that Christ calling for “partners” in the Kingdom of God,  
 Or as he liked to call it: the “God Movement”  
 So, in 1942, with his wife, Florence,  
     and another young couple named Martin & Mabel England  
 Clarence bought some neglected land in Sumter County, Georgia  
     near Americus, and about 10.5 miles from Plains, Georgia.

Together they began the Koinonia farm,  
 and they called it “Koinonia” because that is the Greek word for community  
 that was used in the New Testament.

They called it:  
     a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God.”

The Koinonia farm was a Christian community for white people and poor people.  
 Most of them were poor and didn’t have very much.  
     Their vision was to be an intentional Christian alternative  
     to materialism, racism, and militarism.  
     They wanted to create a community that welcomed everyone.

They were committed to four Gospel principles:

1. Treat all human beings with dignity and justice
2. Choose love over violence.
3. Share all possessions and live simply.
4. Be stewards of the land and its natural resources.

They were committed, they said, to  
 “developing community life on the teachings and principles of Jesus.”

Visitors and neighbors farmed together,  
     ate meals,  
         attended Bible studies  
         and held summer youth camps.

Most local people thought it was a weird, but harmless, experiment.  
 But it sure was hard for them to believe that blacks and whites  
     actually ate together at the dinner table on a Georgia farm.  
     Remember, this was 1942 in the deep South.

Others tried everything they could to stop it.  
 This kind of openness,  
     this welcoming of God’s children,

was just too much.  
It didn't feel safe.  
It went against the way things were done there.  
So, Koinonia farm was boycotted.  
People wouldn't buy their peanuts and pecans.  
When workers from the farm went into town,  
they'd come out of the store and find that their tires had been slashed.  
This went on for over a decade.  
In 1954, the Ku Klux Klan went out to Koinonia farm with a motorcade of 90 cars  
They hoped to intimidate Clarence.  
They wanted him to accept a preposterously low offer for the farm  
and leave the area for good.  
When the motorcade wasn't enough of a threat,  
and Clarence refused to sell the farm,  
The KKK firebombed Koinonia's roadside produce stands.  
And when that didn't work,  
KKK members began driving by and shooting into the homes on the farm  
On more than one occasion,  
the bullets barely missed the heads of children inside the homes.  
One night the KKK came to the farm with guns and torches.  
They set fire to every building on the farm except for Clarence's home.  
But they didn't leave his home alone.  
Before they left the property,  
they riddled his home with bullets.  
The KKK managed to scare a lot of people who had been living at Koinonia,  
and almost all of the families left immediately –  
all except one black family that refused to leave  
and the Jordans.

The next day a local reporter went out to see what remained of the farm.  
The rubble was still smoldering where buildings had once been.  
The land was scorched.  
And Clarence was out in the field, hoeing and planting.  
"I heard the awful news," reporter said,  
"and I came out to do a story on the tragedy of your farm closing."  
Clarence kept on hoeing and planting  
The reporter kept prodding, trying to get a rise from this quiet man.  
Clarence said nothing –  
he just kept on hoeing and planting

Finally, the reporter said,  
"Well, Dr. Jordan,  
you got two of them Ph.D's and you've put fourteen years into this farm,  
and there's nothing left of it at all.  
Just how successful do you think you've been?"  
Well, you could've heard a pin drop, it was that quiet.

Then Clarence stopped hoeing.  
He turned toward the reporter.  
And then he said quietly but firmly,  
    “About as successful as the cross.”  
He went on,  
    “Sir, I don't think you understand us.  
What we are about  
        is not success  
        but faithfulness.”

Clarence and his companions rebuilt the farm,  
and the community is still going strong today.

In 1965, a former Alabama sharecropper  
    who had become a lawyer and a millionaire  
    visited Koinonia Farm for an afternoon with his wife.  
    That afternoon visit, the man liked to say,  
    ended up being a month-long stay.  
The millionaire,  
    a man named Millard Fuller, and his wife Linda  
were both impressed by this way of living faithfully  
    open to the call of God.  
They were so impressed,  
    that three years later, in 1968,  
    they created the Fund for Humanity with Clarence and his wife, Florence.  
Clarence Jordan died the next year, in 1969.

But that is not the end of the story.  
In 1976, Millard and Linda Fuller started Habitat for Humanity in Americus, Ga.  
    It was a project based, as they said,  
    on “biblical economics.”  
That meant,  
    no-interest loans and no profit,  
    no tax money being used,  
    and volunteers working alongside homeowners.  
And a man named Jimmy Carter  
    who lived nearby in Plains  
    was one of the first to provide financial support.  
In 1984, when he was no longer President of the United States,  
    Jimmy Carter joined the board of Habitat for Humanity  
    and began working as a volunteer on the work crews.

And, today, the Koinonia Farm  
    that was started on some neglected land in Sumter County, Georgia  
    keeps helping people  
    break down the walls society asks us to build around our souls

and remember, as Clarence Jordan said,  
“What we are about  
is not success  
but faithfulness.”

Koinonia Farm has been the birthplace of  
Habitat for Humanity International  
Fuller Center for Housing  
Jubilee Partners  
Georgia Peace and Justice Coalition  
and more . . .

Many of us have worked on Habitat teams . . .  
And Edgewood UMC  
is sending a team in 2 weeks to work on a Habitat Home in West Fargo.  
That very house in West Fargo began a long time ago,  
back in 1942  
with a Gospel vision about opening up our souls.

As Clarence Jordan put it:

God doesn't go by the kind of arithmetic that you and I go by.  
God has never learned to deal in fractions.  
God didn't get that far in school.  
I think he's like my father who had ten children, and many a time I thought,  
'Well, my goodness, with a family this big, Daddy can't love me very much.  
I can only claim one tenth of his love.'  
But my father loved me with all of his love.  
It's just that way with love.  
There is no fraction in it.  
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And God wants the whole human race.  
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And so Jesus is saying to these people  
who were griping and mumbling and grumbling  
about the fact that he was taking in all kinds of people,  
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'Well, I just can't help it.  
God just has a sentimental attachment for his people.  
And, whether you like it or not, God loves 'em,  
and it does seem to me that if they're precious in God's sight,  
they ought to be precious in yours, too.'

Sources:

Clarence Jordan, *Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation* (Herald Press, 25th anniversary edition, 2001)  
Koinonia Partners, <http://www.koinoniapartners.org/index.html>

TEXT:

Matthew 16:21-28

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 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? "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. 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."