

Jesus!
“Road to the Cross, #11: Threats to Christian Unity”
Luke 22:24-38

Take a first look.

I. Richard Kidd, staff pastor at Kempsville Presbyterian Church in Virginia Beach, Virginia, told this story:

“When I was in college, a group of us met together regularly to pray in our dorm room. We bonded. We knew everything about each other. And so, when we came back to school after spring break, we were shocked to find out that John, my roommate, had had a terrible skiing accident and was in a coma in Maine.

“We began to pray. We prayed with all of our might, and we received a call from his neurologist. He said, ‘We feel like John’s brain stem injury, which has caused this coma, may be helped if he could hear some of the sounds he ordinarily hears. Could you put together a tape of all of John’s favorite sounds?’

“So we gathered together and put John’s favorite music together. We told all of the bad jokes we ordinarily told, and we did all the crazy things college guys do together. We put it all on the tape. And at the end, we prayed and we wept.

“When they played that tape for John on the sixth day of his coma, while people were praying across the state and across the nation, John came out of his coma.

“And though the doctor said he would never walk correctly or go back to school, John Swanson proved him wrong. He even began to run again. He ran 60 miles a week. He graduated from William and Mary and became a personal research assistant for Al Greenspan.

“We were in community, and community did John’s body good.”¹

II. Community, especially *Christian* community, always does good for those in it! This is why we are called both to a *personal* and to a *corporate* expression of the Christian faith. Remember, even though the Christian life is intensely *personal*, it is never meant to be completely *private*. We share this life in Christ as *the Body of Christ* with others who belong to Him.

III. On the night Jesus was betrayed, His disciples learned some of the things that would threaten that corporate expression of unity in the Christian faith. We would do well to take these threats to Christian unity into account and prepare our hearts accordingly. Let’s take up the story in Luke 22:24.

Take a closer look at Luke 22:24-38. (Begin with 22:24-30.)

I. COMPETITION OVER GREATNESS IS A THREAT TO CHRISTIAN UNITY. Vv. 24-30

1. In this most sacred hour, the disciples of Jesus began to argue over which of them was the *greatest*. How purely human and how drastically pathetic! They moved immediately from the question of who among them could possibly be capable of betraying their Lord to the subject of which of them was considered to be greatest. Can you imagine some of the conversation at this point? Surely Peter, the seeming though unofficial spokesman for the group, had a claim to fame. “I am the one who confessed faith in Jesus as the Christ and received a special blessing from the Lord, remember?” James and John, the “sons of Thunder” (so called by Jesus, see Mark 3:17), could also have a seemingly legitimate claim, since they were the ones who were always included in the inner circle of three with Peter. Each of the disciples could imagine that his personal call from the Lord granted him special favor and status in the group, and surely each man defended himself in this context against being belittled in comparison with the others. But Jesus challenged the whole line of thought. The question itself (“Which one is the greatest?”)

1 Richard Kidd, staff pastor, Kempsville Presbyterian Church, Virginia Beach, Virginia, from sermon, “Community—It Does a Body Good” (9-17-00), from Preaching Today.

was not legitimate, so no answer could be acceptable.

2. *Jesus called His disciples to find greatness in living the servant-life.* He drew a sharp contrast between those who “exercised authority” in the natural realm of human relationships and what He expected of His followers. The great men of the world exert power over others; the followers of Jesus would not. Rather than taking the privileges of position or even of age (v. 26), they would find their greatness in being servants. He used Himself as the best example: “I am among you as *one who serves*” (v. 27). He did assure them that they would have authority in His kingdom to “sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (v. 30, and we are not sure how figurative this expression really was), but this would only be after they had learned that every task is an opportunity to express the servant-life, not a chance to hold power over others.

Insight: We, too, will find our fulfillment when we renounce “the will to power” over others and simply serve in Jesus’ name.

I—Jesus was about to give them a powerful object lesson about this. John records it in chapter 13 of His gospel. This was a critical juncture of understanding the meaning and application of the cross. It lay just ahead, and it would be the ultimate expression of the self-giving nature of the servant-life of Jesus. At this critical moment, these men needed a visual lesson. So, Jesus did what no other person in His position of prestige would do. He washed the feet of His disciples. It was base. It was uncomfortable. These grown men, who wore sandals everywhere, had smelly and dirty feet. Jesus humbled Himself and washed the feet of every one of them, including the feet of His betrayer, Judas Iscariot.

Then He said, “Follow my example.” Every time we do someone else’s menial task, every time we volunteer to keep the nursery so that young parents can worship with the rest of the Church, every time we type someone’s paper, every time we run someone else’s errand, every time we yield our own personal viewpoint to that of another, every time we set up chairs or put them back before or after an event, every time we send a card to a lonely person, every time we take food to people in transition, every time we turn out the lights and lock the doors when everyone else has left the building (including Elvis!), we are expressing the servant-life and following the example of Jesus. And more than this. The washing of feet was an object lesson of the cross. John got this, because he writes in his first general letter: “*In this way we have come to know the love, because That One laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down these lives for the brothers (and sisters)*” (1 John 3:16, FJV).

Jesus says, “Follow my example! Wash each other’s feet! Serve one another in love! Be willing to lay down your lives for each other!”

Luke 22:31-34

II. DENYING OUR FAITH IN CHRIST IS A THREAT TO CHRISTIAN UNITY. Vv. 31-34

1. *Jesus warned Simon (Peter) that Satan planned to “sift him as wheat,” putting him through a difficult trial of his faith.* From Satan’s point of view, such sifting was intended to grind Simon to powder. It was intended to grind all of the disciples to powder (the Greek for “you” is plural here). From God’s point of view, it would help Simon (and ultimately the other disciples) to get rid of the chaff of bad personal character and be refined into godliness.

2. *Jesus called Peter (the “Rock”) to repent and strengthen his brothers, his fellow-Christians.* Did you notice the subtle irony of how Jesus addressed Peter here? When telling him that he (and the others, too) was about to be “sifted as wheat,” Jesus called him Simon. After Simon confidently affirmed his willingness to go to prison and even death with his Lord, Jesus said to him, “I tell you, *Peter*, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.” At the moment that Jesus tells him (and tells all the other disciples, too, I presume) most plainly that he is about to crash big-time, Jesus calls him “Rock” (the meaning of Peter). No doubt the irony must have stung a bit. Jesus could have said this with

pathos and sadness in His voice. Surely there was no delight in His heart as He anticipated that one of His closest friends and disciples would deny that he even knew Him.

But fortunately, this would not be the end of the story. Jesus told Peter, also, that He had prayed for him, and that Peter would surely “turn back,” and when he did, he would have a renewed ministry of strengthening his fellow-Christians, who had run away, too. His crash, though painful, would not be the end of his service, but it would rather offer a new direction to it, of helping others, who were about to follow his bad example, to get back on track again.

Insight: We must confess our own weaknesses and help each other to live the Christian life.

I—We need the lessons of each other’s experiences to keep our own hearts on track. If we don’t learn from others’ hard experiences, we are doomed to learn from our own. This is one of the chief roles of Scripture in the Christian life, by the way. After recounting some of the failures of the ancient people of Israel to act in faith as they came out of slavery into a new freedom, Paul wrote this (1 Corinthians 10:11-13, NIV): “*These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*”

We need the lessons of history, especially of salvation-history, to keep us from making the same mistakes that others in the past have made.

How quickly we forget! The man who ran for president of France in 2007, Jean-Marie Le Pen, was just as racist and anti-Semitic as Adolf Hitler, it seemed, and yet about 6% of the people of France voted for him to be president! Had they no memory of what such ungodly principles lead to? Could they not remember, in the stories of the generation just before us, what Nazism did to their own country? At least 6% of the population of France could not, it seemed. In 2015, his own daughter forced him out of the political party he had founded due to his anti-Semitic views (and more).

We have a generation right now who also seem unaware of the devastation brought on the world through the application of the ideas of Karl Marx. His “class-warfare” model of human relationships has been repackaged as “race warfare,” and it is polarizing and dividing people at a time when we are greatly in need of unity and mutual respect.

We need each other to help us remember, to see trouble coming and avoid it, to look for the way out of temptation and not a way to get by with succumbing to it! We must confess that without the Body of Christ, we might give into any number of personal denials of what it means to know and follow Christ.

Luke 22:35-38

III. A CHANGING CONTEXT OF LIFE AND MINISTRY IS A THREAT TO CHRISTIAN UNITY. Vv. 35-38

1. *The disciples were about to face a drastic change in their mode of relating to Jesus.* Jesus reminded them of the time He sent them out without “purse, bag or sandals.” “Did you lack anything?” He asked. The expected answer from the Greek is “No.” Now He tells them that their instructions are changing, that a new time is coming, and that they must be prepared for it.

2. *Jesus called upon them to trust Him through the change and not give in to ungodly temptations to wrong actions.* He seemed to give them instructions that are contrary to what we would expect: “Take a money bag. Buy a sword.” But there again is irony in His instructions. When they say, “Lord, here are two swords,” Jesus realizes that they missed the irony and says, “That is enough.” Was this a stern rebuke? “Quit this foolish line of thinking; you don’t get it, do you?” Or, was this a quiet expression of sad resignation, “That will do well enough to fulfill the Scripture.”

However we take it, Jesus was forewarning them of perilous times ahead, times that would be tragic and painful, that would test the mettle of all of them. He used a radical figure of speech, at the very

least, to warn them of this change in their context of discipleship. They would have to be ready, even though they would not be as ready when the crunch came as they thought they were.

Insight: We must trust in Christ no matter how different our setting may be from what we have known in the past.

I—This is as immediately applicable as adjusting to a new church after having a good experience at another one. I have found this to be true myself. There are always things about the church “back home” (for those who have had a good experience of church-life elsewhere) that are not present in a new church in a different location. The question is, can we still live for Christ and serve Him, no matter what the setting? The answer should be, “Yes, of course, because our Lord Jesus Christ doesn’t change with our circumstances; His character and calling are still the same no matter where we express it.”

I remember some years ago hearing Lynn Abney, a missionary in Lebanon, say that after 9 years of serving God there in medical work, she had finally come, as she said, “to hang her heart” in Lebanon. She was reporting to us that she had finally come to accept that *home* was now where she lived and served. She no longer considered herself as an *international* missionary; but rather, she was simply serving where she lived. Lebanon had become her *home* mission.

Our challenge is to find a way to serve God right where we are, at this time and place, in this present context of life and work. We must, as the saying goes, “bloom where we are [now] planted.” *We are* salt and light wherever we are, and we must not let anything dilute our saltiness nor cover our light (see Matthew 5:13-16).

I met some friends and fellow-Christians from Arkansas who had been moved up to Washington state for a new job-assignment. They didn’t want to be in Washington in the first place, but the company required it of the husband. On the way up here, a fire broke out in their moving van and destroyed some of their possessions and damaged others from the smoke. The house they wanted to move into wasn’t quite finished yet at the time of their arrival, so the family of four lived in a motel for several weeks. All during that time, they wrestled with the insurance company (of the firm that moved them) to get their belongings repaired or replaced. They found the church where they decided to attend quite unlike the one they had left. They became quite discontent in just about every area of life. It took several years and a potentially fatal car accident to help them recover their sense of grateful love for God and to put behind them their complaints.

Friends, we must remember (however difficult this really is!) that our circumstances can change drastically overnight but that God’s calling upon us and His character haven’t changed with the circumstances. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever!” (Hebrews 13:8). His truth and purposes will be fulfilled, even if we don’t understand what is about to happen next. We can trust Him, follow earnestly after Jesus Christ, and not self-destruct while doing so!

Take it home (applications).

I. WHAT THREATENED THE UNITY OF THE DISCIPLES OF JESUS IN THE FIRST CENTURY still threatens to destroy our unity in Christ today.

1. We must resist the “will to power” and live the servant-life.

2. We must learn to recover by God’s grace from personal failure and take responsibility to help each other stand firm in Christ.

3. We must steel ourselves for changes in circumstances and trust in Christ for this present day and its challenges to the faith.

II. WHAT JESUS TOLD HIS DISCIPLES, HE WOULD TELL US. We must *follow* Him earnestly, *serve* Him

faithfully, and *trust* Him unreservedly.