

“SPIRITUAL SURRENDER”
MATTHEW 16:21-28
AUGUST 30, 2020

Surrender can be a public act of concession, such as when Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered in April 1865 the Northern Virginia Army to Union General Ulysses S. Grant, thereby effectively ending the US Civil War. That was both a publicized and painful act for the South as well as for the North, as the human and social cost of the war for both sides was extreme. Surrender can also be the result of a private war between a person’s ego and their Insistent God who will not take “no” for an answer. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus warns his disciples that following him will not mean an easy surrender nor an easy path forward. There will be suffering. There will be pain. There will be no terms-surrender is surrender. Matthew 16:21-28: hear what the Spirit is saying to the faithful people of God.

Then Jesus made it clear to his disciples that it was now necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, submit to an ordeal of suffering at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and then on the third day be raised up alive. Peter took him in hand, protesting, “Impossible, Master! That can never be!”

But Jesus didn’t swerve. “Peter, get out of my way. Satan, get lost. You have no idea how God works.”

Then Jesus went to work on his disciples. “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; *I* am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?

“Don’t be in such a hurry to go into business for yourself. Before you know it the Son of Man will arrive with all the splendor of his Father, accompanied by an army of angels. You’ll get everything you have coming to you, a personal gift. Some of you standing here are going to see it take place, see the Son of Man in kingdom glory.”

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Once a young soldier was traveling through the country when he stopped to rest his horse in a small village. As he walked around the small houses, he spotted a wood fence. On the wood fence were nearly forty small chalk circles and right in the center of each was a bullet hole.

What amazing accuracy, the soldier thought as he examined the fence. There is not a single shot that has not hit the bullseye.

The soldier quickly set out to find the one who possessed such great skill. He was told that the sharpshooter was a small boy.

‘Who taught you to shoot so well?’ the soldier asked.

‘I taught myself,’ the young lad replied.

Not yet satisfied the soldier pressed the young boy, ‘To what do you attribute your great skill?’

‘Actually,’ the young boy began, ‘it is not very difficult. First, I shoot at the fence, and then I take a piece of chalk and draw circles around the holes.’

[*William R. White, Stories for the Journey, 30.*]

I wonder what the disciples think when Jesus gives them his news? They know better by this time than to poke the hornet’s nest of Pharisees in Jerusalem, for the religious authorities already have it in for them and Jesus. When they hear Jesus intends not only to go to the heart of the trouble, but there to force his arrest and trial, they balk at the plan and want no part of it.

Just last Sunday, Jesus was building them all up, confirming Peter as the rock on which the church would be built and assuring the other disciples that they already had what was needed to carry God’s unconditional love into the world. How are they supposed to make his vision a reality while running from Caesar’s army and Caiaphas’ Temple guards? How are they to survive the path of danger on which Jesus means to lead them?

“Surrender,” he tells them. “Give up your own will; lose your ambition; concede that to follow me, you will suffer, you will know loss, and you will endure pain. No other way is possible.”

I have no doubt his words are met with stone-cold silence. So much for glory and power. So much for riches and fancy clothes, a house with servants

and a happy spouse and children. None of this was to be for his inner circle. Jesus could be a real buzz-kill at times.

It was Pentecost 2005, though I didn't know it then. At 3:30 in the early morning, I had a dream. This dream was like no other dream I had ever had. The colors were vivid and the action clear, not all jumbled up and misfitting as my dreams usually are.

In the dream I was sitting at a nursing facility with an old man who was apparently a resident there. We were engaged in deep conversation. I know this because I was leaning in to him and he appeared very serious. He was sitting in an upright chair—yellow, with blue vertical stripes. He wore a blue housecoat over pajamas and he had slippers on his feet. There was a medical walker sitting off to his left.

I woke up. I looked around my room, saw Chris sleeping peacefully and my dog curled up at the foot of the bed. Though there was no reason to do so, I started crying as it all flooded back to me.

The abuse. The shame. The confusion of being a young and innocent girl forced into adulthood before it was time by someone my family and I trusted and called a friend, my godfather.

I was now 48 years old and had never confronted him. He had never confessed nor apologized for taking my childhood away. I assumed it was my fault that I had done something to stir him into misbehaving. I blamed myself for 25 long years. It was a secret kept in the family; my darkness was their disappointment in me—not in him, but in me.

Talk about shooting holes in the fence and then drawing circles around them! I pretended for 2 ½ decades to be “over it,” pretended that my history would not inform my other relationships, marriage and family narratives. I drew the circles around the bullet holes of my heart and convinced everyone that I was just fine.

Fine that is, until God called me to the vocation of ministry at Pentecost, 2005. I was a successful lawyer and criminal court judge with no thought of ending either career for what? Ministry? No way. Never crossed my mind. I wasn't raised to believe I could be a minister; in the 1950s Lutheran church my family belonged to, girls and women made coffee, taught the children, and kept the pastor's office clean—that was about it.

By 2005 I was a member at Columbine United Church in Littleton, Colorado, and my pastor there had introduced me to a God of love not anger, a God of acceptance not disdain, a God of possibility and invitation, of Yes. Finally, I had met the God who valued me as a female made in God's image, as a person with faults and deficits who could still be a delight in the Maker's eyes and heart.

But I never thought about being a pastor—no, not ever.

Until I woke up from that dream.

I woke Chris up and said the most outrageous thing, I said, "God just spoke to me! I need to go find my godfather and forgive him."

Whoa! Did that just come out of my mouth?

Why in heaven's name would I ever want to go do such a thing?

Why, indeed.

I guess those circles I had drawn around all the bullet holes were exposed for the clever trick they were, the circles that had fooled the people in my life into believing I was an expert markswoman. To be redeemed, I had to forgive. It was that simple. To be healed of those bullet holes, I had to confront the barrel of the weapon that made them and erase the circles protecting them.

To find myself, I had to surrender myself to God's will.

The dream compelled me to go find the person I needed to forgive. I recognized from the dream a local nursing home and on a hunch, I went there that very next day. I was expecting to learn at the front desk that there was no resident there by that name, but to my shock, not only was I told he lived there,

but he was right then in the visiting room. The front desk person asked me, “Do you have an appointment to visit him?” and I quickly replied that I did not. At that moment, I really did not *want* to do anything but turn tail and get out of there as soon as possible. But she said, “That’s okay. It’s just strange. He has Parkinson’s and so he doesn’t come downstairs very often. It’s hard for him to move. He doesn’t have a visitor scheduled for today.”

You know those moments when the hair stands up on the back of your neck?

I took some slow, deep breaths and then I followed through on the dream’s call to me. In the visitor’s room I found him, sitting in a yellow, high back chair with vertical blue stripes, just like in the dream. *Just like in the dream.* He was wearing pajamas and a blue house coat and slippers. A medical walker sat off to his left side.

Ephesians 6:11 tells us to put on “the whole armor of God, lest we be taken in by the wiles of the devil.” I remembered that Bible verse from a sermon preached by my pastor some weeks prior, and it helped me overcome my nerves. The man in the chair recognized me, though it had been many years since we had seen each other. He asked me some questions about my family, and I could tell by his confusion that dementia was at work in him. I thought to myself, *This isn’t a fair fight. I should just go.* But then he asked me what I was doing there, and I blurted out “God told me to come forgive you, so that’s what I am doing. I forgive you.”

And I wept bitter tears decades in the making.

In the awkward silence that followed, I was trying to figure out how this dream had played out so exactly in reality. Dreams never do that, do they? But this one had. Now I understood what had taken place in my silent dream. It was silent because the words needed to be said in real time and space; they didn’t count if all I did was say them in my sleep.

I had surrendered in that moment all the pent-up anger and shame and mis-placed guilt and secrecy of my past trauma. I had ceased to be a victim of his depravity and now, because I had followed Jesus' lead and faced the pain, I was at last walking toward freedom, moving the open, gaping wound of my childhood to the healed and informed scar from which I can tell this story. The deed was complete- I had done as God asked and I was ready to get out of there!

But the most amazing thing happened next. Setting aside nearly 35 years of silence and in the silence, denial, my godfather, now crying too, said, "I'm so sorry about what I did to you. I've wanted to tell you that for a long time." Not in a million years did I ever expect to hear those words come from his mouth. Not in a million billion years.

He died a few months later and though I was invited, I didn't go to his service. Somehow, hearing what a great and generous man he was (for he was famous in Denver) would not have sat very well with me. But I wished him well on his journey to the hereafter, comfortable that we had made our uneasy peace and that he had been able to unburden his heart and I had been able to begin releasing my victimization.

By that time, I was a student at Iliff Seminary, having decided as I drove home from the nursing home that I would, after all, surrender to the call into ministry. My call was to help others know God's love and the peace that comes from reconciliation and redemption not from their sin, but from the damage done by religion and religious zealots who keep stories like mine in the darkness of righteous judgment.

You see, when all this was happening to me as a teenager, I went to my pastor for help. I told him what was happening to me, but instead of believing me and trying to help me, my pastor called me a liar and told me to look inward, since "good girls didn't have these things happen to them." I went to my pastor, because I had been told going to him was the same as going to God but God,

through the pastor, turned a deaf ear to my plight. God, through my pastor, blamed me for what this man was doing to me.

And like many of you perhaps somewhere in your own faith story, I left church. I tried to go to church in college and that sort of worked for a while, but not really. I tried a handful of other times, but I couldn't get past the betrayal and so I gave up. I gave up for 25 years, thinking God had given up on me, God just wasn't interested in my bullet holes.

I gave up on God, but God does not give up on us. The circles we draw neatly around our bullet holes don't fool the Holy Spirit. That's why I am fond of telling you God's Holy Spirit is always dynamic, never static. That's why Jesus counseled his disciples, "Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, *my way*, to finding yourself, your true self."

Surrender means moving forward into your pain, letting it reach you and teach you so that you can eventually be healed. I hope my story may give you that first step towards healing your own. For so, so long, victims of child sexual violation have been hiding in dark closets, afraid of how others will think of them, blame them, and push them away as damaged goods. I have many friends, colleagues and parishioners who, knowing about my bullet holes, have been emboldened to trust me as a lawyer, judge, friend, and now *a pastor*, with their own story of abuse. For this, I am grateful to God. Those who come to me will find safe shelter. Those who seek out God's love will hear it from me in spades. I am telling you from experience that surrendering your own story onto Loving God-Alive takes some of the pain out of it.

Charles Martin, in his book *When Crickets Cry*, wrote this of surrendering to the pain in your own story:

There's a goldmine in salvageable wood draped in kudzu, pine needles and acorns if someone is willing to peel back the vines and plane the wood. It's a slow process, and you're bound to uncover a

few snakes, but maybe life is like that-you never know when something that's been hidden is going to rise up and bite you, or glow with a golden hue.

Being a Christian, being a disciple of Christ that is, is never going to be easy. It's easier to paint white circles of protection around your bullet holes and pretend to others that you are a practiced marksman than to be vulnerable and admit to yourself and the world your deception. It's far easier to be a victim than a survivor, much less a thriver. Healing your wounds into scars takes hard work, sacrifice, and surrender, but that's what Jesus told his disciples they were to do once he was gone. If they allowed themselves to sit around for long moping about losing him, they would never gain their souls. If they were to follow him, they had to let him lead even unto his death, even when the way was populated with biting snakes, twisted vines and perils they could not anticipate.

So it is with us. His way is hard and we *will* suffer along the way. Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote:

In God's eyes there is no hierarchy of suffering. God does not stand aloof, judging us and parsing our pain. The cause of our suffering does not matter to God. God suffers with us. God only wills our healing. God does not desire that we suffer, but if we offer our suffering to God, God will use it. Even if our suffering does not seem ennobling, there are gifts hidden in suffering that can be redeemed only in the experience.

[Desmond & Mpho Tuto, *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference*, 2010]

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