



**THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**AUGUST 30, 2020**  
**MATTHEW 16: 21-28**  
**“THE GREAT REVERSAL”**

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

“Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

**SERMON**

Let’s adjust our religious language this morning.

And call God the hidden boss. That is, we’ve been told that the word “God” designates the being responsible for how all things work, but that the boss hides out in his office and is never seen by anyone.



Now in some ways, this is okay. After all, the boss provides everything we need for life, except that some people keep too much for themselves, others don't play by the rules, yet others actively work against the boss. This means that many people don't have enough of anything that allows them to live meaningful lives.

So, the boss decides to send his right-hand man to let us know how to make sense out of things. And the boss considers his right-hand man to be like a son. And the right-hand man has been with the boss for so long that he knows everything the boss knows.

Now the right-hand man, let's call him JC, gathers around him a group of guys who he teaches about the boss. And they are not the sharpest tools in the shed, so the learning curve is steep.

But there was a breakthrough last week, when peter, one of JC's guys finally figures out that JC is the man sent by the boss to explain how things work.

And JC is happy that at least one of the twelve stooges finally is getting it. But JC wants his gang to keep this news quiet. Why? Because people are going to immediately misunderstand, distort and manipulate this news.

Which brings us to this morning's episode.

Having had his identity revealed, JC takes the next step and tells his guys that the way things work is that the people in power, both political and religious, are going to take him down, make him suffer, and then kill him.

Now this doesn't make sense to peter. And frankly, this doesn't make sense to most of us.

After all, if you're the right-hand man of the boss and the boss is running the show then, between the boss and the right-hand man, everything should remain in their control.



And, doesn't being in control, means that these two call the shots? After all, don't these two have the power? That's how we think, right? If you're the boss that must mean you have the power and power means control.

And, if we have any brains at all, we'll want to get as close as possible to the boss and JC, so we get power and control from being in the "in-crowd."

So it is that Peter protests, "man, this can't happen. You and the boss are in charge, JC!"

And so, JC rips Peter by saying, "dude, you don't get it. You are confusing your narrow human values with the boss' values. Your concerns are not the boss' concerns. The way the boss' hidden world works is not the way your human visible world works.

And really, JC, has been clear about this from the time of his first TED talk: that the boss' world is intertwined with our human world, but that they are different.

The difficulty comes in telling them apart.

For the most part, we've done a terrible job of teasing them apart and understanding how they differ.

Many, if not most of us, think and live as though the boss' job is to make sure we have what our little hearts and minds want.

And so, from the time of the Roman emperor, Constantine, down to President Trump, so-called religious leaders like to cozy up to political power.

And to ascribe power, wealth, control, the finer things in life, health, success, achievements, beauty, influence, and personal victories to the blessings of the boss.

And, from the time we settled in this country, America has been seen as just one great blessing from the boss, that we were to use for our human concerns.



And so the earth and air and water and animals and forests and natural resources have been and continue to be treated as though they are all here for us to use and misuse in whatever way fulfills our unbridled need for more and more of everything.

To put it simply, we have lived as if what we want is what God wants for us.

And we have taken this distorted religious viewpoint as far as it will go for anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear, as JC says elsewhere.

Instead of the world being our oyster, we're destroying the oyster's habitat, which also happens to be our habitat.

But that's another story, perhaps.

We may have difficulty with the boss' right-hand man, because JC says that the spiritual world and its concerns are in opposition to human concerns.

"whoever wants to be part of my boss' group must deny themselves, that is reject concerns for power, wealth, control, the finer things in life, health, success, achievements, beauty, influence, and personal victories and take up their cross—which is the boss' symbol for suffering—and follow me.

For whoever wants to protect their human concerns will lose them, but whoever willingly turns their back on human concerns will find a meaningful, satisfying life.

Because what good is it going to do you to live in a McMansion while losing your soul?

And what does losing your soul mean?

Losing your soul means that you lose a perspective that makes life meaning. You lose the ability to build a life of interconnected and life-giving experiences, rather than just a set of events—I bought a new car. I went to Hawaii on vacation. I ate a seven-course meal at an exclusive restaurant.



losing your soul means losing any deep connection to the boss, JC, and their spirit. Losing your soul means being disconnected from love and spirituality and the beyond after death. Losing your soul means losing the experience of self-reflection and imagination.

But we do not give up our human concerns unless....

We do not reject the notion that the boss is up there to bless us with good things we desire unless....

We do not grow beyond our self-centeredness unless....

Unless what?

Unless we suffer as JC suffers. The boss sends him to show us the universal spiritual pattern that has the soulful power to disconnect us from the human and connect us to the divine.

Our ego does not surrender without a fight. Because who in their right mind chooses to exchange personal success and the pursuit of happiness for suffering?

If we understand suffering as those times when we no longer have control—like now—“then we see why some form of suffering is absolutely necessary to teach us how to live beyond the illusion of control “and to surrender and humble ourselves before God.

I find it painful that so many of our strategies for this pandemic have little to do with anything other than denying what is happening so we can get back to the way it used to be—our human concerns. When are we going to face that the world is being remade by this suffering—that the world must need to be remade by our suffering?



Let me remind us we are liminal space—we are in the divine in- between place. We have left a world that will never return as we knew it and it is still very unclear what the new normal is going to look like.

And so, we are experiencing divine suffering.

Think of the immense suffering:

Teachers and administrators suffering to find a way to provide safe educational opportunities

Small business owners suffering to keep afloat

Parents suffering to hold their family together while they work/or don't work and educate their children at home with some sense of normalcy

The 175,000 people who have suffered and died without family by their side. The families carrying the suffering of grief

All those who suffer to maintain their sobriety or suffer to stay straight

College students suffering

Children suffering while so many of the markers of growing up have been removed

The poor who suffer daily to maintain the basics of life

We are united in suffering. United under a cross where the God/man is nailed as a symbol that we must suffer if we are to be transformed

Everyone suffers. Not so much rightly or wrongly, but because we are alive.

Western religion made a serious wrong turn when it began to interpret suffering as something to be avoided, as a sign of punishment, as something that was to be fought against as meaningless, as something to be conquered in the name of God who was imagined to no longer present in suffering.

All that is superficial, legalistic, divisive, smiley-face happy and repulsive about Christianity followed that wrong turn.

Faith became believing certain “truths” rather than trust in life which includes suffering. Rather than suffering being the spiritual path that follows Jesus, suffering became the sign that something has gone wrong on the spiritual path.



So now we largely have a western religion that is ego-centered: faith means God exists to make me healthy, wealthy, and happy. Religion is about victory, claiming God's promises, and being blessed. God as the narcissist's ultimate dream.

Which means if you bought this form of religion, then you will not be able to make meaning out of our experience of the pandemic.

Necessary suffering allows us to grow spiritually and soulfully. Necessary suffering connects us to the suffering of others. Necessary suffering connects us to the divine

The soul must experience suffering to come alive so that we go deeper, further, beyond what we imagine ourselves to be. Suffering remakes us in the image of the boss, creatively caring for the world.

The great spiritual teachers have called these times of suffering a dying before our death, a seed falling into the ground, the dark night of the soul, the cloud of unknowing, trials and tribulations.

The way to make it through this pandemic is to understand that through our collective suffering, the boss is remaking the world. That this suffering must be necessary to bring about a new transformed world. What the pandemic has exposed is how broken are our institutions, our government, our economics, our human ways.

And it seems that suffering is the only way we will face this truth.

Yet, if we stay in touch with the divine presence present in our suffering, we develop capacity for empathy, compassion, non-judgment, a willingness to sacrifice what we have so that others may live.

From the beginning of the divine story when the boss places an angel with a flaming sword at the gates of Eden to the end when JC says "I am making all



things new,” the divine is always out ahead of us, involved in the process of creating new out of the old, life out of death, transformation out of suffering.

Faith is a matter of being willing to keep our eyes open to what is happening around us and being mindful that God is present in our suffering. That coming to know that suffering is what transforms us and gives our suffering meaning and purpose. That we allow it, accept it, and pay attention to it, which is the root meaning of religion—to pay careful attention.

My therapist, who I’ve known for thirty years, was buried this past Monday. In his last days, he suffered terribly. The final chapter in his transformation. In part, his obituary read, “he was always mindful that each human being was in a terrible struggle for survival and, to the extent that he could, practiced kindness and compassion.”

We are all in this terrible struggle for survival. To the extent that we are able, let us practice kindness and compassion to those around us.

## **SERMON SONG**

**Hallelujah** by Jeff Buckley