

“In the Footsteps of the Lord, part Six,  
The One of Singleness of Heart and Mind”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for March 15<sup>th</sup> 2020 (Third Sunday in Lent)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 26: 36-46

It was the remarkable German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer—one of the true heroes and genuine martyrs of the Nazi horror...

...it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer to whom we largely owe the phrase, “Jesus is the man for others,” a phrase which, I suspect, resonates with so many of us...a phrase which in many ways captures the dimension of our own denomination that most truly defines the United Church **at its best**: a Church which most definitely does not wish to be so “heavenly minded” that it is no “earthly good”. We most certainly do wish to be “the church for others,” much as we wish to see Jesus as Bonhoeffer saw Jesus: as the man for others. As a matter of fact:

When we view, in retrospect, the journey we have taken over the past five Sundays—walking in the footsteps of the Lord—there is a very real sense in which each of the five touchstones we have visited during this time, point to the variety of ways in which Jesus lived his life “for others”. We spoke first of the abiding impression he would have made on his contemporaries, who most certainly would have recognized him as a prophet: one who sought to bring heaven’s word down to earth, out of deep concern for the lives of men and women. Next we noted the special vocation Jesus the prophet undertook: that of the herald who proclaimed the coming of God’s Kingdom, offering words (and still offering words) of comfort and challenge to all who have ears with which to hear. His work as healer and as teacher represented a two-pronged outreach to the human world, bringing healing and renewal of body, soul and spirit. And yes, as founder of the church, he laid the foundation-stone for an institution which—its many flaws and shortcomings notwithstanding—has sought to continue his witness and his work on behalf of the human family. In all of these ways and more, Jesus truly earned the title Bonhoeffer conferred upon him: the man for others. And yet.

Were he here this morning....

...were we, this morning, instead of hearing me preach a sermon, privileged to hear me interview Jesus...

...I am quite certain that he would correct me by pointing out that the reason he was equipped to be “for others” was because—first and foremost—he was “for God.” And he would, no doubt, remind us that the word on the lips of the Prophet is **God’s** word, that the Kingdom proclaimed by the Herald is **God’s** Kingdom, that the healing brought by the Healer is nothing more than a manifestation of **God’s** goodness, that the teaching brought by the Teacher seeks to invite others to embark upon the way that returns us to **God** and, finally, that the church—once founded—will be of no earthly good whatsoever unless it grounds its words and its deeds in the way and the will of **God**. In short, there is nothing more characteristic of the Jesus we have

come to know as the one for others, than the fact that first and foremost he was the one for God: that for him the Holy God—the One to whom he prayed in closest intimacy—was Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of his every thought, his every word, his every deed. Or as the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard so rightly phrased it: “purity of heart is to will one thing”, in the case of Jesus that one “thing” being nothing less than the Holy God.

\* \* \* \* \*

Quite frankly...quite frankly...it was impossible for me—at this juncture and in this context—not to have invited us to head to Gethsemane, knowing full well that we have arrived here a wee bit early. Yes, it's Lent...but we have yet to reach even the half-way point in our Lenten journey. Given that it is far more customary to visit Gethsemane during Holy Week—in particular to do so on Maundy Thursday—I nevertheless saw myself with no alternative but to head there this morning, as soon as I realized that no portrait of Jesus could be complete were it to fail to recognize this most central facet of his identity: his singleness of heart and mind, his desire to ground his entire being in the way and will of God, even when it involved embracing a destiny which, in his full humanity, he found every bit as terrifying as you or I would have found such a destiny. And yes...to be fair:

There are other places in the Gospel—in Matthew's Gospel—to which I could have turned this morning. There are certainly no shortage of teaching passages in which Christ's singleness of heart and mind become abundantly clear. His admonition to “seek first the Kingdom of God.” His insistence that our piety ought to be practiced privately rather than paraded in front of others so that our “Father”, who sees in secret will reward in secret. I could also have made use of that poignant passage—after he learns of the beheading of John the Baptist—when Christ withdraws to be alone in prayer. Perhaps, especially, we could have profited—this is Lent after all!—by hearing the story of Christ's tempting in the wilderness, just prior to his launching of his public ministry: temptations, the rebuff of which reach their resounding climax, when he turns to the devil to insist: “*You shall worship the Lord your God and him **only** shall you serve.*” In many ways those words serve not only as a powerful rebuke of the devil but serve, also, as a programmatic announcement of the mission and ministry Jesus is about to undertake on behalf of the God in whom he has placed his trust. That too would have been a fitting scripture text on which to centre our thoughts this morning had we sought other evidence of his “singleness of heart and mind”. For that matter....

...for that matter, had I been looking for evidence beyond the pages of Matthew's Gospel, there are countless other places to which I might well have turned. In fact, there is likely no better source for this than a handful of the Psalms, at least some of which I personally find impossible to pray unless I do so “hearing” the voice of Jesus as the one actually doing the praying. If any of you have the practice of reading or praying the psalms, you will be aware that they can pose multiple challenges to us as readers and as pray-ers. At times they take-up themes which seem obscure in the context of the lives we lead. At times they seem uncomfortably vengeful, asking God to

destroy the enemy: in a way that seems positively un-Christlike. This morning, however, the challenge I have in mind involves those passages in which the psalmist—the poet, the pray-er—expresses a devotion to God that I know far outstrips my own life of devotion. From the 62<sup>nd</sup> Psalm:

*For God **alone** my soul waits in silence;  
from him comes my salvation.  
He **alone** is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.*

To my ears that voice...that voice is the voice of Jesus. Or again, from the 63<sup>rd</sup> Psalm:

*O God, you are my God, **earnestly** I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

To my ears that voice, also, is the voice of Jesus. Or again, one further example from the 73<sup>rd</sup> Psalm:

*I am continually with you;  
you hold my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will receive me to glory.  
Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And there is **nothing** on earth that I desire besides you.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

Surely that too is the voice of Jesus! Indeed, were I to pray that psalm pretending that I have arrived at a place in my life where I can claim that “there is **nothing** on earth that I desire besides God”...I would not only be lying to God: I would be lying to myself. As a matter of fact—as those who attend the monthly prayer-circle will know—I have recently begun making greater use of what is known as the Daily Office, a series of prayers said throughout the day, including the recitation of many of the psalms. These prayers are best offered in community; they are the “bread and butter” (so to speak) of monastic communities. But when you say them privately—as I have been doing—it is recommended that you preface your offering of the daily prayers by first saying this prayer...which I truly love.

“Lord, open my lips to praise your holy name. Cleanse my heart of any worthless, evil or distracting thoughts.” There’s a bit more to that prayer than those words...but for me that portion of the prayer really nails it: by naming the great trifecta of issues that seek to undermine my life of prayer: **worthless, evil or distracting thoughts**. Those, especially the distractions...especially the distractions...are what

always seek to undermine my prayers. I'll find myself praying, either extemporaneously or from a prayer-book, and before I know it the distractions arrive. Suddenly, instead of praying, I am busy....

...busy preparing shopping lists, thinking about next Sunday's sermon, stewing about a conversation from the previous day, getting ready in my head for a meeting I'll be attending the next day...

...those are but a few of the typical distractions that intervene in my life of prayer: the prayer of someone who is far from attaining the singleness...the singleness of heart and mind so abundantly on display at Gethsemane....the singleness of heart and mind that stands in such contrast to the fuzziness, distractedness, or sleepiness of others including myself and, of course, including Peter, James and John who snoozed while their teacher poured out his heart in the Garden. Poured out his devotion to God...with a singleness of heart and mind...with a purity of vision and intent...that sealed his identity as the man for God...thereby opening the gateways through which he served...and continues to serve...as the man for others. For you. For me. For us all!

\* \* \* \* \*

Permit me to offer something of a coda this morning: doing so at a time when I cannot imagine proclaiming the Gospel without some acknowledgement of the way in which our world has been turned upside down these past few weeks by the COVID-19 drama. To say that this is a time of great uncertainty is to indulge in a terrible understatement. Indeed: this is a scary time, in part, because there is so much uncertainty. The decision to cancel yesterday's men's breakfast—or this morning's coffee hour—can feel like an over-reaction. And yet, the decision to meet for worship—this morning—can feel like we are not taking this crisis as seriously as it ought to be taken. And yes: there is this wee part of me that is tempted to crawl into a corner, assume a fetal position, and ask someone to wake me up when it's all over. Clearly that is not going to cut it! And I was thankful...thankful that of the many COVID-19 related reflections that crossed my desk on Friday...there was one from the pen of C.S. Lewis, reflecting not on the advent of this novel Coronavirus, but on the advent of the Atomic Bomb.

Lewis, in that reflection, addresses a hypothetical questioner asking how one is to live in the midst of an atomic age. He confesses that he is tempted to respond to that question by replying: How are we to live? "Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents." To which he adds: "If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like

frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies...but they need not dominate our minds.”

There’s much wisdom in that...although I hasten to note that preparing for COVID-19 differs in one crucial respect from living in an atomic age, namely that we face the threat of a virus against which **precautions most definitely need to be taken!** None of that will be fun...especially if we have to take a break from our Sunday gathering. But none of it ought to distract us from remembering that—in the end—COVID-19 does not define the world in which we live. As the Velveteen Rabbit would insist: it’s not really “real”. It does not define the **ultimate** nature of the world in which we live. Trust me on this!

There is nothing more real...nothing that points us more surely to the heart of all that truly matters, all that is truly real...than the way of this Jesus: whose singleness of heart and mind, whose laser-like devotion to the Father, points us unfailingly to the only thing that will matter in the end. Many voices speak to us at this time...many of them (including the voices of knowledgeable health authorities) voices to which we have no choice but to pay heed. But, in the end, it is the voice of Jesus that we dare not permit to be lost in the shuffle and in the confusion and chaos. The voice of one who, in the very act of his unswerving devotion to God, found the grace to become **our** neighbour, **our** saviour, **our** truest friend. Even on the bleakest of days...and even through the most uncertain of times...he will not abandon us. His singleness of heart and mind abides! His singleness of heart and mind makes room for us! Always has! Always will.

May it be so! In His most gracious of names! Thanks be to God!

### **A Prayer for This Day and for This Time**

Most holy God...most gracious God:  
We give you thanks for the gift of this new day  
and all this day holds for us:  
holds for us by way of beauty, goodness and truth.  
We live in a world of wonder and yet,  
we have no choice but to confess that, all too often,  
we are oblivious to the things that ought to stir our hearts and minds.  
Open our eyes this day,  
that we might have the capacity to see the glory of your hand,  
through the glories of the world  
that you have fashioned for us,  
fashioned in your power and in your love.  
May this day truly be a day, O God,  
in which our gratitude overflows!

**Nevertheless!**

We will not pretend  
that this day does not also hold for us  
great uncertainty and yes...great fear.  
Acknowledging how little we fully comprehend  
of the grave challenge we now face through this pandemic:  
we ask for wisdom.  
Acknowledging how readily we succumb to doubt  
and permit despair to creep into the very fibre of our being,  
we ask for faith and for hope.  
Acknowledging how ready we are to restrict our care and our concern  
only to those nearest and dearest to us,  
we ask for the same spirit of generous love  
that guided the way of Jesus.  
And yes, acknowledging how easily we permit fear to dominate  
our hearts and minds,  
we ask for courage.

### **However!**

We do so as those who are eager to be gifted with discernment,  
the discernment to distinguish between genuine courage and empty bravado,  
and a willingness to recall that the opposite of fear is not recklessness:  
as well as the recognition that love, at times, must take the road less travelled.

Help us, O God, to find a way to live in **this** time,  
a way forward that is truly and genuinely suited to this time,  
even if that requires actions and attitudes which seem counter-intuitive:  
including the counter-intuitive action of distancing ourselves from others,  
not in the name of fear but in the name of love.

O God: be especially with those on the medical frontlines  
at this challenging time,  
as well as in the hearts of those who have lost loved ones,  
those whose own health has been compromised,  
and all who are facing horrendously tough choices  
that will impact not only their own lives,  
but the lives of those whom have placed their trust in them.

Help us, Dear Friend, to place our trust in you,  
now and always,  
grounded in the certainty that we live in your world,  
that in life, in death and in life beyond death  
we are not alone!

We offer these and all our prayers  
In the name...and in the Spirit of Jesus,  
our comfort, our challenge, our guide.

**Amen.**