

## **It's No Secret**

A Sermon on Matthew 16: 21-28 by Rich Holmes

Delivered on September 3, 2017 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

I remember when I was about nine or ten I belonged to a secret club. In fact it was a secret club on about three different levels. Only those who were in the club knew where the club met, only those in the club knew the password to get into the club, and only those who were in the club knew what we did in the club. Now, I can assure you that the things we did and talked about at that club were not all that interesting. If I remember it was just a club where a bunch of boys would get together to eat Oreos and play with their Star Wars action figures, but the fact that we had all these secrets seemed to make it all the more interesting.

In the sermon that Mike Baker preached last week, he told the gospel story about the time when Peter declared that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah—and every time that story is told it reminds me of that club, because in that story, there is so much secrecy surrounding Jesus' identity. Jesus did not say to his disciples after all, "I am the Christ", but he says "Who do people say that I am?" and then "Who do you say that I am?" And then even after Peter answers him by saying "You are the Christ", he doesn't even answer him directly by saying "Yes, Peter, that's right!" He only implies that Peter is right. It is as if this is all some big mystery that not everyone can know.

But today as we continue that story and Jesus tells us more about what being the Christ means, it is clear to us that there is no secret about how we belong in the Christ club, as it were, how it is that we become one of Jesus' followers. And what does Jesus say one must do to become his follower? Must they pass some test in theology and know a lot of facts about God? No. He doesn't say that. Must they go to church a certain number of Sundays, must they

memorize a certain number of bible verses? No, he doesn't say that either. "Oh, I know, I know!" you might say, "In order to be Jesus' disciple you have to look like him." You know, every now and then whenever I go to a popular place where a big crowd is gathered, I will see someone who is preaching or handing out religious tracts who appears to me like he is trying as hard as he can to look like Jesus. A lot of people seem to think that if you want to be a follower of Jesus you have to look like Jesus, or at least like the pictures of Jesus we see with the robes and sandals, the beard, all that. But Jesus doesn't even say to do that. No, instead he says, "If anyone would become my disciple, if anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. Whoever wants to be my disciple must sacrifice, they must lose their lives, take up their cross and follow me."

In 1966, John Lennon was being interviewed about the Beatles when he famously or infamously said "We are more popular now than Jesus Christ." Now, if you remember that, you may also remember that John Lennon's statement lead to worldwide outrage. It seemed to be the height of blasphemy as most people thought he was comparing himself to Christ or even saying he was better than Christ. Well, that may have been what Lennon was doing. It probably was if the truth be told. But he was also saying something else with this "more popular than Jesus" remark. Lennon was also saying that by the year 1966, the Beatles had become so popular, that there were literally more Beatles fans than Christians in the world. And that was saying something. That was saying something because then as now there are lots of people in the world who claim to follow the Son of God. According to the estimates that I have read there are about 2.2 billion Christians in this world, and in this country alone there are 66 million

people who are members of some kind of church, but you know what, in this country as popular as the person Jesus is, self-denial does not seem to be quite as popular, does it? Many people will tell you just how much they love Jesus, just how much they adore Jesus, but they will see no conflict between following Jesus and complete and total devotion to self. A good friend of mine named Drew Andersen went to high school at the prestigious Macallie private school in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Now, Macallie is such a prestigious school that they were able to get a rather famous televangelist to come and give the commencement speech for Drew's graduation. I won't say who the televangelist was, but his speech was all about how God wanted the Macallie graduates to be as rich as they possibly could. It was all about how God had a plan for all of them to become as rich as they possibly could. Now, I see nothing wrong with some corporate CEO or someone who has made a fortune as an entrepreneur making a speech like that, but this was not a corporate CEO or a successful entrepreneur, but someone who claimed to speak in the name of God. Now, you know what, I will tell you something. I know that here at Northminster we are a small church. We are not a tiny church. But we are definitely a small church. Now, I can also tell you that we have the best people here that you can find anywhere in the world, and I am also told that we have the most handsome pastor anywhere in the world. That's just what I'm told. But I know every now and then it will be natural for someone to go down to one of these megachurches down the street with a parking lot that seems to stretch out as far as the eye can see and in spite of knowing that we have the best members anywhere and the most handsome pastor anywhere, you will scratch your head and you'll want to know what's their secret? What can we at Northminster do to have as many members as they do? Well, I'll tell you one thing we can do. It's actually very easy. We can print

up fliers and put them all around town and we can tell people that your pastor, the Reverend Doctor Rich Holmes will be preaching a series of sermons on how God has a plan to make them all as rich as possible. Can I preach like that? Of course I can. The sermons practically write themselves. Sunday after Sunday I can get up and say "If you believe that Jesus loves you, then why in the world wouldn't Jesus want you to be as happy as you can possibly be, and what could possibly make you happier than living your life on easy street." If I did that, I promise you we would never have to worry about our membership again. We will be the hottest show in town, because sacrifice in this world is not popular. Greed is popular, wealth is popular, selfishness is popular, but sacrifice, no way. But you know what? The good news is that this trend is nothing new. It has always been that way with God's people. If you know your bible you know that the false prophets who preach comfort and ease have always been much more popular than the prophets who speak the true message of the Lord. The Book of Jeremiah talks all about the false prophets who fill people with false hopes. It tells about the false prophet Hananiah who when God's people had lived as exiles in the foreign land of Babylon for two years, got up in the temple and proclaimed that God came to him and said the exile will only last another two years. There was a light at the end of the tunnel. Oh, the people loved that. They loved Hananiah. They hated Jeremiah who told them the truth. And the truth was the exile was just beginning and it would last another 57 years. And in the same way in this age as in every age the message of sacrifice is not popular. But Jesus says "If you want to follow me, you have to lose yourself. You have to give up your attachments to this world for my sake and for the sake of the gospel. Take up your cross and follow me."

Now, I know that all this might sound so foreign to us. It may sound especially foreign to those who for so long have heard the gospel of wealth and power, but it may even sound foreign to those who haven't. But you know what? If you are always worried about the material things in this world that you might end up losing, you will never ever be at peace. Jesus said "Why do you worry about what you will eat or what you will wear?" and "Who by worrying ever added a single day to their life?" And isn't it such a tragedy, isn't it such a tragedy that far too many people find that out much too late? They spend their whole lives worrying about things, worrying about losing out on that promotion and whether their house is big enough or their car is fancy enough or their vacation is exotic enough and finally they get to the end of their lives and they realize they never even took one day, not one day to sit back and just enjoy the life that God had given them, so worried were they about all these other things, so preoccupied were they about all these things that really don't matter. What if they could have just listened to the words of our Lord when they were in their teens, or even their twenties or thirties or even forties, but they get to the end of their lives and they find out for themselves that what our Lord said was true all along. You will never be at peace, you will never know real joy if you spend your life worrying about all these things that you can't take with you.

John Jacob Astor, the patriarch of the famous Astor family made his fortune in the fur trade and was the world's first multi-millionaire. Astor's wealth in today's money would be about \$600 million, and you would think that if money could ever buy happiness, 600 million dollars would be enough, but Astor was quoted one time as saying "I am the most miserable man on earth." 600 million. If 600 million dollars is not enough to make you happy, just how much do you think will be? You cannot buy your way to happiness, you cannot empower your way to

happiness, you cannot conquer your way to happiness, because as long as you are focused on yourself you are missing out on the key to life.

It may not be popular, it may not fill the pews on a Sunday morning to talk about this, but Jesus says “If you want to be my disciple, you must deny yourself take up your cross and follow me.” Don’t wait too late to find out that this is the key to living, don’t wait too late to find out that this is the true path to joy and peace.