

August 31, 2014

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Taking On and Taking Up”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



The Church of the Covenant  
Presbyterian Church (USA)  
11205 Euclid Avenue  
Cleveland, Ohio 44106  
[CovenantWeb.org](http://CovenantWeb.org)

## Matthew 16:21-28

*21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? 27 "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."*

## **“Taking On and Taking Up”**

Matthew 16:21-28

Right before the New Testament text we just heard, Jesus asks his disciples two questions: Who do other people say I am? and Who do you say I am? The disciple Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the one sent to save God’s people.

At first, Jesus praises Peter for his answer, promising him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. But then, Jesus starts saying things that just don't make a lot of sense.

First, Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. Then, he explains that being the Messiah is not about ending Roman oppression; it’s about traveling to Jerusalem, being tortured and killed by his own religious leaders, and then being raised from the dead three days later.

When Peter refuses to accept this explanation, Jesus goes about as easy on him as an attending physician on an intern. “Get behind me, Satan. You’re focusing too much on human things. I have to focus on divine things. I have to stay true to who God has called me to be and what God has called me to do. You can either join me or get out of my way.”

On September 14, 2001, three days after the most deadly attack ever on American soil, the White House held a prayer service in the National Cathedral. An impressive list of national leaders were there: former presidents and cabinet members, current Congressional leaders from both the House and Senate. One of the first people to speak was Nathan Baxter, dean of the cathedral. He began with a reading from the prophet Jeremiah and then looked out at the dignitaries gathered in the cathedral and spoke again: “Now let us seek that assurance in prayer,” he said, “that as we act, we not become the evil we deplore.”

Little did Baxter know that those words were exactly what one member of the congregation needed to hear. Barbara Lee was a junior Congresswoman from the San Francisco Bay Area, and she had been consumed for the last 24 hours with a dilemma: whether or not to vote for a 60-word resolution authorizing the President of the United States to use “all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001.”

The Senate had passed this resolution just before the prayer service began, and the House would vote that afternoon. Barbara Lee did not want to vote for the resolution but had been struggling to articulate why. Baxter’s words instantly

resonated with her: “that as we act, we not become the evil we deplore.” That was the reason she felt compelled to vote against the authorization of force.

Later that day, when she stood on the House floor, Lee spoke with great emotion. “However difficult this vote may be,” she said, “some of us must urge the use of restraint. Some of us must say, “Let’s step back for a moment, let’s just pause, just for a minute, and think through the implications of our actions today so that this does not spiral out of control.” She closed her remarks with the line that had convinced her to vote against the resolution: “As we act, let us not become the evil we deplore.”

The resolution passed the House with a vote of 420 to one. Barbara Lee was the only member of the House or the Senate to vote against the resolution.<sup>1</sup>

Everyone of us has multiple roles, multiple identities. That is simply part of what it is to be a human being in a complex world. In our daily lives we slip in and out of these roles from hour to hour, sometimes even from minute to minute. We have our professional identities — we might be teachers or homemakers or students or health care professionals or lawyers or retirees. We have our relational identities — we are someone’s child or someone’s spouse or someone’s parent or someone’s cousin or someone’s friend. We have our social identities — we are the shy one or the good conversationalist or the funny one or the life of the party. And we have our secret identities — those parts of ourselves that we share with no one else or with only a very few people. The addict, the adulterer, the doubter, the one consumed by greed, the one wracked by shame.

When God appears to Moses in the burning bush, God instructs Moses to take off his shoes before he comes any closer. When Jesus tells his disciples what it is going to mean to follow him, he tells them to deny themselves.

According to both of these texts, the prerequisite for responding to God’s call is this: we must take off every identity except one.

Father Gregory Boyle, a Catholic priest who has spent decades ministering in the projects of Los Angeles, writes about a conversation he had with a gang member who epitomized cool. This kid didn’t walk, he swaggered, with a head bob and a serious scowl and the confidence that everyone was watching him. When they first met, Father Gregory asked him his name.

“Sniper,” he sneered.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.buzzfeed.com/gregorydjohansen/60-words-and-a-war-without-end-the-untold-story-of-the-most#4d3hb2b>

But Father Gregory had been around this block many times before. “Okay, look,” he said, “I have a feeling you didn’t pop outta your mom and she took one look at your sorry [self] and said, ‘Sniper.’ So, come on, dog, what’s your name?”

The kid relented, just a little. “Gonzalez,” he said.

“Now, son,” said the priest, “I know some people will call you by your last name, but I’m not down with that. Tell me, what’s your mom call you?”

“Cabron,” he responded, with the slightest flicker of innocence, even though, if you’re familiar with Spanish slang, you know this is not a nice name.

“No doubt.” Father Gregory said. “But, son, I’m looking for birth certificate here.”

Finally, the kid softened. His posture and his expression lost their swagger and revealed embarrassment and a vulnerability.

“Napoleon,” he managed.

“Wow,” Father Gregory said. “That’s a fine, noble, historic name. But I’m almost positive that when your mama calls you, she doesn’t use the whole nine yards. Come on, tell me, do you have a nick name? What’s your mom call you?”

Then, in front of Father’s eyes, the kid went to some far, distant place -- a place he hadn’t been in a long time. His voice, body language, and whole being took on a new shape.

“Sometimes,” he said in a really quiet voice, “sometimes...when my mom’s not mad at me...she calls me...Napito.”

Father Gregory writes, “I watched this kid move, transformed, from Sniper to Gonzalez to Cabron to Napoleon to Napito. We all just want to be called by the name our mom uses when she’s not mad at us.”<sup>2</sup>

God is not impressed by whatever titles or authority the world has given us. God doesn’t look at us and see only what’s on the outside. God also doesn’t look at us and see only what we try so hard to keep hidden. God doesn’t call us Doctor or Your Honor or Professor or Sir or Ma’am. And God doesn’t call us addict or adulterer or greedy or shameful either — even though we might know, deep down, that these things define us too. God looks at all those names and passes over them to call us by our first name, our original name, the name no other name can

---

<sup>2</sup> Boyle, Gregory (2010-02-14). Tattoos on the Heart (p. 53-54). Simon & Schuster, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

cover up or take away: beloved. God knows who other people say we are, God knows who we say we are...and God calls us beloved.

You may know Aaron Rodgers as the quarterback of the Green Bay Packers. But Aaron Rodgers is more than just a talented athlete. He has been an integral part of spreading the word about the atrocities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has been consumed for years by a brutal civil war. Rodgers speaks across the country for a group called Raise Hope for the Congo, which tries to raise awareness about this war and the minerals that are being mined and sold to fund it — minerals like gold, tin, and tungsten, the very ones that power all the devices to which we are so beholden: our laptops, our smartphones, our tablets.

Why is Aaron Rodgers so passionate about this cause? At a college campus during a rally for Raise Hope the Congo, he explained it like this: “I remember sitting on the bus after we won [the Super Bowl]...probably two hours after the game, thinking to myself, ‘I’m on top of the world. We just accomplished the most amazing goal in football.’ But I’m sitting there with a semi-empty feeling because I accomplished everything I wanted to do since I was a kid, and I kind of had a moment. I said to myself, ‘Is this it? Is there more to life than this?’ And the answer was resoundingly, ‘Yes.’”<sup>3</sup>

Getting past all those outer layers of identity and accepting that we are God’s beloved children — like Moses taking off his shoes and the disciples denying themselves — is the first step in following Jesus. For Barbara Lee, this was the moment in the National Cathedral when she knew she had to vote no. For Sniper, this was the moment when he admitted to Father Boyle that his mother sometimes calls him Napito. For Aaron Rodgers, this was the moment after the Super Bowl when he realized he wanted more out of life than football.

Following Jesus is always first about claiming our identity, just as Jesus had to do in the passage we heard today. He ruthlessly shows his disciples that he is neither what other people say he is, nor is he exactly what they say he is, even though they are on the right track. He is God’s. For us to follow him means that the most important identity, the most significant role in our lives, is that we are loved and claimed by God.

Once we have claimed this identity, we then need to figure out what to do with it. Jesus’ core identity means that he has to go to Jerusalem and die and be raised. And

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://espn.go.com/nfl/playoffs/2013/story/\\_id/10135747/aaron-rodgers-finds-worthy-cause-raise-hope-congo](http://espn.go.com/nfl/playoffs/2013/story/_id/10135747/aaron-rodgers-finds-worthy-cause-raise-hope-congo)

he calls his disciples — and us — to follow him there...to death and to new life. This is what he calls “taking up your cross” and “losing your life to save it.” In order to do that we have to figure out how God is calling us, as individuals living in this time and this place, to share God's love with the world.

For Moses, God's call involved going back to the country and people from which he had long ago fled as a fugitive. For Barbara Lee, responding to God's call meant standing up in front of her colleagues and constituents and country and voting no when everyone else voted yes...and enduring all the criticism and accusations and even death threats that followed that vote. For Sniper it meant doing the very hard work of walking away from gang life and re-integrating himself into society. For Aaron Rodgers it meant listening to horrific stories of war in the Congo and traveling around the country to raise awareness and funds so that the atrocities will stop.

Taking off and taking up — these are the things we must do to follow Jesus. These are the tasks of discipleship: taking off the identities by which others define us and remembering that we are, first and foremost, God's; and taking up our crosses — doing those things that God has called us to do.

I don't know the specifics of the cross God calls you to bear. I don't know the precise ways God is calling you to give up your life in order to save it. What I do know is this: We are each of us God's beloved. We are exactly who God created us to be and nothing we do can ever change that. And because God created us and claims and loves us, God also has a purpose for us, a place for us in God's economy. Claiming that true identity and finding our place in God's world is not easy, but it leads to a profound sense of purpose, meaning, and deep joy. It is the journey through death to new life, the path we must take to follow Jesus. So take off your shoes and take up your cross. Give your life — all of it — to God. Amen.



11205 Euclid Avenue  
Cleveland, Ohio 44106  
CovenantWeb.org

*Convinced of God's grace, the Church of the Covenant strives to be a caring and compassionate congregation, welcoming all people regardless of age, race, national origin, marital status, gender, affectional orientation, and mental or physical ability.*