January 7, 2024

Rick Myatt

DON’T FIGHT THE PILOT

John 16:25-33

Occasionally you will hear someone, usually a woman, say that men get older but never actually grow up. I confess that hits a little too close to home for me. One manifestation of that is how I think about Christmas presents. As a kid I thought that Christmas presents should be toys. I did not want clothes for Christmas. I’ve never completely gotten over that, which causes problems for my wife, because at my age it is almost impossible to find age appropriate toys. I don’t do much playing any more so what toys can she get for me? All of that to say I had zero idea what Laurie was going to get me this past Christmas. She had several presents under the tree for me. When we opened our gifts she told me to open one particular present first. I was totally surprised when I unwrapped it. She gave me a grabber, a tool for picking things up without bending down. This was totally unexpected. Also unwanted, by the way. It really is the latest in a long string of jokes about being old. Those jokes are getting less funny by the year. But as I said, it was a surprise. I could have guessed for 10 years what Laurie was going to give me for Christmas and I never would have come up with that.

I am going to talk about getting something unexpected today. There is something most of us kind of expect from God, at least to some degree. If God loves us, how will he treat us? Surely he will want us to experience good, because that’s what it means to love. You seek good for those you love. If God loves us then it only makes sense that he will give us good things in life, not bad. He will want us to have the best possible life. It seems reasonable that he will want us to be successful, have a thriving family and relationships, be prosperous and live a long, healthy life. Many people proclaim this to be true and say the only thing that keeps us from experiencing that is lack of faith. God has the ability and will to give it all to us. We just need to believe it and act on it in faith. This message is very appealing because it makes sense to us and because we all want to have great lives.

This is often referred to as the prosperity gospel or the health and wealth gospel, and it is wildly popular. One of the promoters of this message, Kenneth Copeland, said that Jesus has won for us “Healing, he won deliverance, he won financial prosperity, marital prosperity, physical prosperity, and family prosperity.” He said there is something wrong if a Christian doesn’t become rich. There have been and continue to be many others with a similar message.

If God really does love us, surely he would not want us to experience pain and disappointment, right? I love my children and grandchildren, and I do all I can to keep them from going through pain, loss and disappointment. Surely I am not better or more loving than God, so he must want the same thing for his children, doesn’t he?

Kate Bowler is a professor at Duke Divinity School. She has undertaken to study the prosperity gospel movement. She recently had an article on the Vox website about what she has learned. She wrote of those in the prosperity movement, “Some wanted Bentleys, but more wanted relief from the wounds of their past and the pain of their present. People wanted salvation from bleak medical diagnoses; they wanted to see God rescue their broken teenagers or their misfiring marriages. They wanted talismans to ward off the things that go bump in the night. They wanted an iota of power over the things that ripped their lives apart.” She came to realize that while she rolled her eyes at the excesses and outrageous claims of some proponents of the message, she nevertheless coveted what they promised and had her own little version of the prosperity gospel. She said her version fell apart when she was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer that has not gone away.

We all want God to show up, to do something to protect us and to rescue us from the threats and hurts and losses of this world. But is it possible we might get something we don’t expect? Today we will examine John 16:25-33 and will see what Jesus said about this.

WE WILL HAVE TROUBLE

In the last verse of this section Jesus told his followers something that required only 7 words in English. In Greek it only took 5 words. The statement is, “In this world you will have trouble.” The word translated trouble came from a verb that meant to press, squash. Jesus was warning his men they were going to be squashed. Paul would later describe it as being pressed down. It is to be oppressed, harassed, put in a bind.

The disciples had just had an “aha” moment. Jesus had been repeatedly telling them that he was going to leave them and he was going to the Father, but they just weren’t getting it. That’s probably because they were convinced Jesus was the Messiah, and in their version of the Messiah he would be the ruler of all and there would be no end to his kingdom. That belief was so loud they could not hear what Jesus was saying about leaving. Messiah could not just leave, or in this case, be killed. He had to rule the whole world without end.

In verse 29 the disciples said, “Now you are speaking clearly.” Oh, right. That was the problem. Jesus hadn’t been clear. He wasn’t great at communication. It couldn’t be that the problem was at the other end of the transmit-receive interaction, could it? What they say in verse 30 really astounds me. “Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God.”

Jesus answered “Do you now believe?” That little statement could be understood in several different ways depending on where you put the emphasis. It could have the emphasis on the word “Do,” so Jesus would be questioning if they actually do believe. Or you could put the emphasis on the word “now” so it has the sense of saying “finally you believe.” I think he was probably the first, because he then told them that very night their faith in him would crumble.

Gee, they came to the startling conclusion that Jesus came from God. What have they been thinking for the last couple of years? When they saw Jesus heal blind people, didn’t they think that was maybe a bit unusual? When they saw him change water into wine or feed thousands of people with a tuna sandwich, didn’t they think this was a bit more than your average human trick? When they saw him calm a storm with a word, didn’t that give them a clue? Now you think Jesus came from God? Exactly what were you thinking when he raised Lazarus from his tomb?

Jesus knew this much-delayed insight wasn’t going to last very long. He warned them that very night they would all run away and leave him alone. Their failure was going to weigh on them. But Jesus wanted them to know that he knew all about it, so not to worry, things would be all right. He loved them anyway. But he also wanted them to know that there would be rough waters ahead. Yes, he is from God, but they were going to face some serious trouble in the future, and they needed to know that. Serving God does not mean that everything is going to be smooth sailing. Quite the opposite.

The disciples would find out the hard way that this was literally true. They were soon going to face opposition and even hatred from their countrymen and women. That opposition would eventually grow violent. Every one of the apostles would eventually be killed for their faith except one. That one was John, who had to endure serious persecution and was eventually banished from his homeland and had to live out his days in exile.

Those were not the only troubles they faced. They also had to deal with the normal difficulties of human life. They had to deal with physical problems, financial difficulties, troubles with relationships and all of the rest of the woes of the human condition.

There are people who will tell you that it is God’s will for you to not have trouble, but to have nothing but unending victory. It is God’s will for you to be wealthy, successful, continually blessed. Yet Jesus comes along and says, “In this world you are going to have trouble.” That is a very different message. One of Jesus’ closest friends, Peter, would write a letter to Christians in which he said in 1 Peter 4:12, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” A fiery ordeal doesn’t sound like prosperity on every front. It sounds painful, and Peter said when it happens, don’t be surprised. It is not some strange, unexpected thing. It is exactly what Jesus warned us about.

Jesus has, as usual, proven absolutely correct. The Collins Dictionary every year declares what the word of the year is. As you can imagine their word for 2020 was “pandemic.” The word for 2022 describes our world perfectly. It was “permacrisis.” It captures the sense that we somehow are always in crisis as we lurch from one disaster to another. You will have trouble indeed.

I have mentioned that last year was a hard year all around for our family. If you wanted a picture that would capture the theme of the year for me, it would be a picture of me in a chair at the cancer center receiving an infusion. During Christmas we all expressed the hope that 2024 will be a better year for the entire family. In jest, Laurie said to me at one point this week, “Rick, maybe you should think about switching over to a health and wealth message, because we have gotten all of the ‘in this world you will have trouble’ part we need. This year has started off with great sadness over the loss of a brother and the resulting difficult situation our sister Janet Savittieri faces.

Why is the world this way? I don’t know. Jesus didn’t explain that. But Jesus told us this because he didn’t want us to be surprised by it. If we believe what makes sense to us, that God is going to make life rosy for us, we are setting ourselves up for a loss of faith, because at some point we’re going to get smacked in the face by the painful reality of life. It will feel to us like God has pulled a bait and switch on us. We will think he is not to be trusted. Who knows, maybe he’s not there at all. But if we know the truth, that we live in a world infected by evil, that this is a fallen place full of trials, threats and suffering, then we won’t be shaken when the bullets start to fly.

If you swim in the ocean, first you are going to get wet, and second, you are going to get salt on your skin. That’s because the ocean is made of salt water. Go in salt water and you get wet and salty. Similarly, if you live in a world full of evil and suffering, you had better expect some of it is going to get on you.

What a cheerful, hopeful message for the first Sunday of the year. Thanks for sharing Rick We all feel so encouraged. Hold on. There is some good news.

JESUS WANTS US TO HAVE PEACE

In verse 33 Jesus said, “I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace.” Jesus didn’t say he wanted everything to go their way. He didn’t say he always wanted them to be on top, to be powerful and successful. But he did say he wanted them to have peace despite the troubles that would come.

When the prophet Isaiah prophesied about the coming of the Messiah some 800 years earlier he said he would be “the Prince of Peace.” Not the Prince of Success, not the Prince of Power, not the Prince of Prosperity. He is the Prince of Peace, and what he came to produce in our lives is peace no matter what our circumstance. For us to truly have peace, the peace we have must be sourced from something other than good circumstances. It needs to be something inside us that is there regardless of what happens outside.

In Romans 15:33 Paul wrote, “The God of peace be with you all.” In 2 Corinthians 13:11 Paul wrote, “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.” The same night Jesus spoke the words of John 16:33 he had said in John 14:27, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

There is a familiar passage in Philippians 4:6-7 that has a great promise. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Rather than being fearful, pray to God, ask him what you desire in every situation. What the prosperity gospel people tell us, and what we expect, is that God will answer our prayers and give us whatever we want. But that’s not what the next verse promises. It says, “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” What God will give us in Christ is not whatever we want, but peace.

We so often think that what we want is what the prosperity gospel types claim to offer us, but it isn’t. Just a little bit of thought will make that obvious. Suppose that you could have everything you thought you wanted and life was exactly how you would design it for yourself, but you had no peace. Would you be satisfied with that? I wouldn’t, and I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t either. And there are countless examples of people having exactly that. The classic line from one of my favorite old movies, *Field Of Dream*s, is “It is money they have, and peace they lack.” Conversely, imagine that everything is going wrong in your life, that you have none of what the world thinks of as the good life, but you have an abundance of peace. Would you be happy with that? I think the answer is yes. Which tells us what we really desire is peace. And that is exactly what Jesus wants his people to have.

Are you familiar with Tony Hsieh? He was a brilliant business guru who took over Zappos soon after it was founded when it was on the verge of collapse, and he turned it into hugely successful online retailer that was eventually sold to Amazon for $1.2 billion. He wanted more than success. He wanted to promote happiness and peace. After he published a book titled *Delivering Happiness: A Path To Profits*, he became a sort of workplace happiness wonk. But he never found peace. He struggled with anxiety, depression and alcohol abuse. Shortly before he died he suffered an emotional breakdown. He died at the age of 46 in a house fire that was determined to be accidental. He wanted peace. He promoted peace. He was fabulously wealthy and successful, but he never had peace.

Christmas day we were at Toby and Anna’s house for dinner and then opening some presents. We were bummed that Michael couldn’t be there because he had to fly that day. He got to fly to Maui, but that hardly made up for the fact that he was working on Christmas Day. However, the rest of our tribe was there, 6 adults, 6 kids and 2 dogs, with 3 of the kids under the age of 3. There was one point after all the presents were opened that there was pandemonium. The kids were all a bit hyper from the excitement of Christmas so there was a ton of energy and even more noise. It was fun, but chaotic. I noticed little 2 and a half year old Bria. Bria is mostly emotionally binary, meaning she is on or off. When she’s off she is volcanic, and the eruptions are spectacular, and when she’s on she is the happiest child you can imagine. There’s very little in between with her. She had gotten a little play tea set for Christmas. What caught my attention was how she played quietly and happily with that tea set. She was totally absorbed in it. There was chaos erupting all around her, kids running, shouting, laughing, playing with the new toys, dogs bouncing off the walls, and right in the middle of it she stood there quietly playing with that tea set for a good half hour or more. She just screened out the noise and peacefully played away. She was the very picture of calm, of peace in the turmoil. It was a little picture for me of what Jesus wants for us. His desire is that we could be in the middle of a storm, but still be calm and at peace.

Jesus never said there wouldn’t be turmoil. He told us to expect chaos and tumult of all kinds. He wanted us to be calm, inside and out, even when it is like there’s a volcano erupting right by us. But how are we supposed to have that kind of peace? We’d love to be at peace no matter what is going on, but all too often when there’s turmoil on the outside, there’s even more on the inside. In fact, for us, we often manufacture turmoil even when there is none around us. What can help us have that peace?

**Remember that the Father loves his children**.

In verse 27 Jesus said, “The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.” This is a critical information for us. At the core of every human there are some basic needs. We need to feel loved, we need to feel secure, safe, and we need to feel we have value. If we aren’t loved and if we don’t feel we have value it totally distorts our souls. It is incredibly painful to us. If we don’t feel secure we will never have true peace.

We will never be at peace until those needs are met. The problem is that all our lives we have known that to be loved we need to be lovable and to be valued we must deserve it, we must have worth. So every day of our loves we have tried to be good enough to get someone to love us and we have tried to prove our worth. We strive to be strong enough to have control, because if we control things we can feel safe. But we somehow never seem to meet our needs that way. We always fall short. So we go through life constantly striving, ever working to arrive at the place where at last we are loved and valued, ever trying to protect ourselves and control the world. The result is we are never truly at peace, we are never truly at rest, we never can let our guard down and feel safe.

Jesus made this astounding claim that the key to meeting those needs is loving him and believing in him. It’s not proving we love him by how good we are. It is simply believing he was who he said he was and loving him for coming to rescue us. If we do that simple thing God loves us like a Father. In John 1:12 earlier it said we become the children of God.

Why does a Father love his children? It is because they are his children. Nothing can ever change that. I remember a moment when this became vividly clear to me. Before we had kids I was not a guy who liked it when friends who had infants asked, “Would you like to hold the baby?” I did it to avoid offending them, but I made it as brief as possible. My experience was that human infants did a lot of disgusting things. They are very good at spitting up and pooping, both of which I found to be less than appealing. I figured if I held a baby it was only a matter of time until they did something gross that was going to end up all over me. Then Carissa was born. Laurie and I both went to her 6 week well baby visit with the pediatrician. I was wearing some cream colored shorts and a navy blue shirt. I was holding Carissa as we were in the doctor’s waiting room. While there, sure enough, little baby Carissa spit up all over my blue shirt. All this white stuff she expelled made quite a contrast to that blue shirt. We cleaned it up the best we could. Then our turn came to see the doctor. I stood up and discovered that Carissa had cut loose a massive poop that overwhelmed her diaper. I had that golden stuff all over the front of my shorts. I wasn’t thrilled to have spit up and poop on me. But that didn’t change the powerful love I had for that little girl even a tiny bit. Nothing has ever changed how I feel about any of our children or grandchildren. I love them completely when they are at their best and when they are at their worst. That’s what a father does, and now that’s what a Bapaw does. That’s what God the Father does. Why do you suppose he wants us to see him as Father? This is why.

But does he value us? Well, Jesus entered this world and went to the extreme of the cross in order to bring us into his kingdom. He values us that much. There is no value greater than that. He doesn’t value us because we are so worthy and deserving. He values us simply because we believe in him.

Every human has an infinite need to be loved, valued and secure. We try to fill that by being loved by other people. That is certainly important and it surely helps. But there will always be a problem. Our need is endless. Finite beings, no matter how much they try, can never be infinite. They can never completely meet that need. Only the one being who is infinite can fully meet that need. Only God, in his grace and infinite love can finally meet that need and bring peace to our hearts.

This is why Paul prayed in Ephesians 3:17-18 that we would be rooted and established in God’s love and that we would be able to grasp how wide and long and high and deep his love is. He prayed that we would see that it extends infinitely in every dimension so that nothing could ever separate us from it. Knowing that love, being rooted in it, is key to our souls being at peace.

A difficult moment, of which I have had quite a few in the past year, happened toward the end of the summer. I was closing in on the end of the cancer treatments I’d been going through all year and was really looking forward to being done. They did some scans and were concerned about a nodule they saw on my thyroid gland. The doctors determined it met the criteria for a biopsy, so they did that, and the result came back that it almost certainly was cancer. That was a really low moment for me. They said it was good news that it wasn’t related to the melanoma. I knew that was true, but it meant that I had 2 kinds of cancer at the same time. It felt to me like apparently my immune system had dropped back 15 yards and punted. It had waved the white flag, which I figured meant there would be more kinds of cancer showing up down the road. It was discouraging. But even in that down time my soul was at peace. The circumstance would certainly qualify as trouble, but it didn’t change anything about God’s love for me. Of course, as you know, that ended up with good news when they surgically removed that lobe of my thyroid and discovered that it wasn’t cancer at all.

Yes, we will have trouble in this world. All of us will. But even in the middle of it we can be at peace because God loves us and values us beyond our ability to comprehend. He is our Father, and we are secure in his love, for as a Father he is looking out for our good always. But can we feel safe? We need to hold on to one other thing Jesus said here.

**Remember that Jesus has overcome the world.**

The other crucial truth for us to remember is that Jesus said he has overcome the world. I have a couple of pairs of shoes that have the well known swoosh emblem on them. They are made by Nike. Why is an athletic apparel company named Nike? Nike is from the Greek word that means “victory.” It is the root of the word translated “overcome” in this verse. Jesus said he has had victory over the world.

What caught my attention was that John quoted him using the perfect tense of the verb. Not, “I will have victory over the world.” Not, “I am having victory over the world.” The perfect tense referred to a completed action in the past that has continuing results in the present. So Jesus claimed he already had victory over the world, and the effects of that would continue on into the future. In what sense had Jesus had victory over the world and how does that help us?

Things were about to happen to Jesus that looked like he lost badly and the world that opposed him won in a rout. He even told his followers that trouble was coming for them, trouble that would make it seem like the world was winning big time and they were losing. What Jesus was claiming here is that he had already won the battle with the world. It wouldn’t look like it for a minute, but then it would become apparent that he had won and that all that happened was his plan all along. Yes, the world would succeed in killing him, but it would turn out that was part of his plan to rescue us. It had been a part of the plan for a long, long time. Isaiah had prophesied it 800;years before Jesus came along.

Peter got it. A few weeks later he would preach to a large crowd of people in Jerusalem. Acts 2:22-23 quotes Peter, speaking of Jesus, saying, “This man was handed over to you *by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge;* and you, with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead.” What happened to Jesus wasn’t an unforeseen horrible defeat. It looked like it to the disciples of Jesus, but Peter had learned it was in fact the plan all along. God had won the victory even before the events unfolded, because his plan was going to be carried out.

How does that help us? It reminds us that Jesus has won the victory over the world in our lives as well. Things are going to happen to us that are painful, difficult, troubling, confusing. That’s what Jesus meant when he said in this world we will have trouble. But we can trust that none of it is unforeseen, unanticipated. Jesus has a plan, and it is going forward. Though we may not understand how, we know the plan is to bring about good for us. That’s what gives us peace. God is in our lives, he is at work in our world, and because he is a loving Father he is always seeking our good. His plan to bring about our good will not be thwarted, because Jesus has overcome the world.

One of the big threats to our peace is our inability to control the world around us and to protect ourselves from its threats. The critical truth that can help us is that though we don’t control much in this world, God does. Our loving Father has overcome the world, so all we need to do is trust him. Relax, quit holding on with a death grip, and let him work his good plan in our lives.

Years ago we had what I suspect will be a once in a lifetime experience. We were on vacation in Hawaii with all of our children before they had kids. On the last day of our stay we rented a small airplane and our son in law, Michael, flying the plane, took us on an aerial tour of Molokai, Lanai and Maui. I wasn’t sure about flying around in a small airplane, but Michael is a consummate pilot. He is the best of the best. Our government trusted him to fly the F18, a supersonic fighter jet, and Delta airlines trusts him to fly huge airliners packed with people, so it made since to have total confidence in him flying a Cessna. He has some things about him that give him an edge as a pilot. He has phenomenal eyesight. We took off from Maui’s airport where you fly immediately out over the ocean. As we were ascending Michael said, “Oh, look, you can see turtles in the water down there.” We saw the water, but neither of us could see any turtles. He could see stuff that we couldn’t. It was a spectacular day. We saw some magnificent scenery. Because we had such confidence in Michael we didn’t worry about anything. We were completely at peace that we were safe. When we got to the end of the tour we flew along the northern coast of Maui until we neared the airport, then we turned south to get into the landing pattern. As we were passing the airport the tower informed Michael that there was an airliner on approach, but it was far enough away that there was a small space for us to land ahead of it if we wished. Michael decided to do that, so he practically stood that plane on its right wing and made a steep turning descent to line up with the runway. Would it have been smart of me to decide this was a bad idea and to try to wrestle control of the plane from him? No, that would have been idiotic, because I don’t know how to fly a plane and he is one of the best in the world at it. We just trusted him. He got that plane lined up, descended and landed that plane as smooth as silk. The message for us is God is the consummate pilot of the world. He has won the victory over it. It is foolish for us to try to wrestle control of life away from him, because the irrefutable truth is we don’t have the ability to fly that plane. Only he does. So we trust in his victory and rest as his plan plays out. That is our greatest source of peace.