

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
Sunday, August 30, 2026 – Table Copy

SILENT PREPARATION:

Ask yourself these three key actionable questions:

What should I preserve?

What should I achieve?

What should I avoid?

— Bishop Dale C. Bronner

CALL TO WORSHIP (Adapted from the 105th Psalm)

Leader: O give thanks to the LORD; call on his name; make known his deeds among the peoples.

People: **Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works.**

Leader: Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles and the judgments he uttered.

People: **Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually.**

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)

We tremble to think that the Source of all life – the Creator of all worlds – is in this place: observing our worship, knowing our innermost secrets, calling us by name. O God, we dare to call on you, to bow before you, to welcome your Word. Move among us this day, that we might be drawn close to one another and to you, and that our discipleship might be strengthened, for Jesus's sake. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Great God of our ancestors, whose presence among us in Jesus of Nazareth continues – both to comfort us, and to challenge us: Speak to us now through your Word, that we might have the courage and strength to follow you, and to deny ourselves. Increase among us empathy with all who suffer, identification with the lowly, and a spirit of hospitality for all – to the end that we may contribute to peace, the peace that you intend for all humankind. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING

Romans 11:33-36; 12:1-2, 9-21

In Chapters 9 through 11,

Paul has lamented the failure of his Jewish brothers and sisters – the Children of Israel – to come to faith in their Messiah.

But – at the end of Chapter 11,

he expresses his confidence that God's Covenant with Israel is irrevocable.

Our Lectionary reading starts with verses from Chapter 12 –

but Verse 1 begins with a “therefore.”

And so, the last verses of Chapter 11 are included to provide context....

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!
‘For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?’
‘Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?’
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory for ever. Amen.
I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God,
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship.
Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God —
what is good, and acceptable, and perfect.
Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another in showing honor.
Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.
Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.
Live in harmony with one another;
do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;
do not claim to be wiser than you are.
Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.
If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;
for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’
No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them;
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink;
for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 16:21-28

Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel immediately follows last week's.

In case you did get your copy of the related Bible Study,

Peter has just made his dramatic confession —

that [Jesus] is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And, Jesus has — then — instructed his disciples not to tell anyone....

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.
And Peter took him aside – and began to rebuke him,
 saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”
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.”
Then, Jesus told his disciples,
 “If any want to become my followers,
 let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
For those who want to save their life will lose it,
 and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.
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?
“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.
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.”

SERMON “Deny Yourself, Take Up Your Cross, and Follow Me” (?)

Concerning today’s Gospel reading, a woman once said – to her pastor –
 “Whenever I hear this Bible passage, I smell potato soup.”

It was a curious thing to say – but then, she explained.

When she was a teenager,
 her mother had announced they were going to church –
 for a *“sacrificial supper.”*

It had something to do with the **Season of Lent**.
 And – as a low-church family –
 any talk of **Lent** didn’t make much sense to her..

As they gathered – one **Sunday night**, in late winter,
the **Fellowship Hall** was half-empty.

The kitchen door opened, and somebody brought out a pot of potato soup.
It was white, pasty, and smelled like onions.

The teenager – then – pushed the bowl aside,
and waited for the next course – which never arrived.

It seemed like a cruel joke – the entire menu was potato soup –
there was nothing else to eat.

At the end of dinner, the pastor stood up and explained that it was **Lent** –
the *season of self-denial*.

On a normal **Sunday** – he said – most of us might sit down to a large meal.
But – this night – they were giving up a fine dinner,
and choosing a simpler menu.

“*The reason we were doing this,*” he said,
“*was because Christians are people who deny themselves,*
pick up a cross, and follow Jesus.”

So, does **potato soup** have *anything to do* with **Christian discipleship**?

Well, maybe not –
but there is a *strong connection* to the text we heard this morning.

We hear this text most often during the **Season of Lent**.

That – of course – is the traditional *time of preparation*,
a season for to *remember the cross* –
and to prepare for the *joy of the resurrection*.

And, there’s no question that self-denial is a central theme for such days –
which often coincide with a **bleak, North American, winter**.

But – when we probe more deeply –
we learn that *self-denial is central to the story of Jesus.*

In our **Gospel** text, **Jesus** tells his disciples he is going to suffer – and die.

This is the *first time* **Jesus** has said it – that the **Son of the living God** will suffer.

The **One** who came to confront every kind of evil will be destroyed by evil.

That **Jesus** – himself – will deny himself, and pick up a cross.

He has chosen to save the world – even if it means losing his life.

Simon Peter – then – *does not* understand this.

But, who can blame him? It is – most certainly – a difficult message to hear.

Nevertheless – if anybody wants **salvation** – which is found only in **Jesus** –
they must remember how he endured suffering, and rejection.

The fact is that **Jesus** did not swoop down from heaven –
ready to snatch us from earthly sins.

Rather, he came down to earth – and stayed – until he was interred in a tomb.

And – immediately before our text – in last week's **Gospel Reading** –
Peter makes his great confession – concerning **Jesus' identity**:
"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Peter was right – as far as he was able to envision – at that, particular, moment.

What **Peter** could – not yet – comprehend,
was that **Jesus** would give up his life –
in the *ultimate act* of self-denial.

He would take the low road – all the way to the cross.

That is a **hard picture** to keep in focus.

Indeed, **Jesus' sacrifice** harshly *critiques our cultural perceptions* –
of success, and accomplishment.

And, **Jesus** says it quite clearly:

*"If any wish to come after me,
let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me."*

But – nevertheless – the low road **Jesus** took is the only road available –
for those who choose to tag along behind him.

Consequently, this is not an easy word for us to hear.

The three imperatives clang like a cracked bell:
deny yourself..., take up your cross..., follow me.....

His words sound harsh, because we can – easily –
take them to mean that we should put ourselves down –
for the sake of the **Gospel**.

And perhaps – even – to the point of denying our **God-given dignity** –
that which derives from our creation in the very image of God.

Some of the people who may get upset – about this point of view –
are *smart, capable people*.

But, they may have been subject to a *systematic put-down*.

They have been told they are *second-class citizens* –
and are expected to serve everybody else.

Some other people – when **Jesus** says, *"Deny yourselves"* –
find it difficult to hear those words –
when they've had *so much taken away*.

How can **people in poverty** believe it is a virtue –
to give up what little dignity they bear?

How can the **downtrodden** ever hear this word from Christ?

The question – then – is this: How do we appropriately respond?

Here, it helps to set these words *within the entire context* of **Matthew's Gospel**.

According to **Matthew**,
Jesus comes to *make a constructive difference* in the world.

Jesus confronts every destructive force that disturbs human life.

God sends him to *teach about* – and *demonstrate* – **God's grace** –
and to *give back dignity* to all from whom it has been taken away.

For the person with leprosy –
segregated from the community by his disease –
Jesus restores him to health, and community.

For the woman on the fringe of the town –
who suffers from a hemorrhage –
she is healed, and given a name.

For the sinner – who cannot undo the effects of his misdeeds –
Jesus cancels all his debts with **God**.

Matthew – then – tells us how **Jesus** comes to give worth, and value –
not to take it away.

So, let's *rethink the order* of those **three imperatives**:
deny yourself, take up a cross, follow me.

Which comes first? **Which** is most important to **God**?

We *can* deny ourselves.

But – as we know –
we run the risk of ignoring our **God-given dignity**.

We *can* go out looking for a cross to carry – effectively saying –
“Hit me again.”

Yet, **Jesus** never says,
“Go out into the world – and get yourself beaten up!”

Rather – he says – ***“Follow me.”***

In the **Gospel of Matthew**, *that* is what matters.

We are invited to follow **Jesus**.

We are *called for* – and *called upon* – to follow him.

This **invitation** *comes before* every other claim on our lives.

And, following **Jesus** – then – means two things.

First, we become his disciples.

That means that we must put ourselves in the proper position –
to learn from **Jesus**.

We give up the tempting illusion – that we are experts in leading our own lives.

We revise our personal agendas – so that we *have time to learn* from **Jesus**.

Second – if we follow **Jesus** –
that means we will engage in the same kinds of work –
that **Jesus** has been doing.

That is to say:

We will speak out against every mean spirit,
we will feed the hungry, and heal the sick,
we will speak the truth,
we will touch the untouchable,
forgive the unforgivable,
and love the unlovable.

In short, we will do **God's work** in the world – just as **Jesus** did.

Doing these things *may not come easily* to us,
but – in those efforts – we *are* denying ourselves,
and *helping to carry the cross* of Christ.

And – *when we do that* –
we have good reason to expect – that what happened to him –
might happen to us.

Thinking along these lines, as one **New Testament scholar** –
Brian K. Blount, my Greek Professor at Princeton – reminds us,
that the members of the early church *were not* called to suffer.

Rather, they *were called* to preach the **Gospel**.

But – because of the *confrontational nature* of that calling –
the world they confronted persecuted them – *to stop them*.

Suffering – then – is *the result* of the call, *not* the call itself.

What happened to **Jesus** –
for the same reason that it happened to him –
may also happen to those acting – and preaching – in his name.

And – for this reason – we do not wake up every morning,
and say, “*How am I going to let the world beat me up today?*”

But – on the other hand –

we are *called upon* to get out of bed to ask,

*“How can I let the whole world know that the life of Jesus
is the only hope of the world?”*

To be sure, some of us may have thought that

those **three commands** had to stay in the same order
that they appear in the **Bible**:

Deny yourself, go looking for a cross, and then follow Jesus.

But the emphasis – in the *wider context* of **Matthew’s Gospel** –
moves in the other direction.

The *most important thing for us* is to follow **Jesus Christ**,
to learn from him, and to do his work.

And – *if* the world does hand us a cross –
we should not expect anything different.

So – what does come first?

Jesus ultimately says, *“Come, follow me.”*

But that *does not* mean that we will – *intentionally* –
put ourselves in positions where we will be put down, beaten up, or killed.

Rather, it *does mean* we will take **God** *more seriously* than we take ourselves.

John Calvin *helps to clarify this* - in his Institutes of the Christian Religion:

He wrote that self-denial is *“the sum of the Christian life.”*

He claimed that self-denial is the *heart of true piety*,
the *basis of generous stewardship*,
and the *source of our helpfulness* to our neighbors.

But denying ourselves – *in this context* –
means that we do hold back –
but, because we have put **God's purposes** *before our own*.

This **spiritual discipline** – then – reduces our desire to possess,
our hunger for power,
and our thirst for the approval of others.

In other words – as we said **last Sunday** –
we should be willing to be “*invisible influencers*.”

True self-denial is the foundation for a humble life of service.

We put **God's ways** *before* our own pursuits.

We choose to follow **Jesus** – and to do his work.

Nothing else will come before it.

“Follow me. Pick up your cross. Deny yourself.”

Whether we hear these words in the **winter of Lent** –
or the **dog days of summer** –
this is the essence of Christ's invitation.

We *do not* give up our dignity,
but *we do* take on the **mantle of faithfulness**.

This means that we minister as **Jesus** came – from the **Father** – to minister.

That we speak – as **Jesus** would speak.

And – if a cross *is* given to us – we *will not* carry it alone.

Jesus Christ carried his cross – for us – and for all.

Now –risen from the dead, he *comes alongside us* –
through the gift of the **Holy Spirit** –
who is our **Guide**, our **Comforter**, and our **Enabler**.

And, therefore – paraphrasing what the **Apostle Paul** wrote to the **Philippians** –
“*We can do all things through Christ who strengthen us!*” (4:13)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

(Adapted from the Confession of 1967)

God’s sovereign love is a mystery beyond the reach of our minds. We believe that God has created the world of space and time to be the sphere of God’s dealings with humankind. In its beauty and vastness, transcendence and awe-fulness, order and disorder, the world reflects to the eye of faith the majesty and mystery of its Creator.

We believe that God has created us for a personal relationship in which we may respond to the love of the Creator. Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage. Thanks be to God.
Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

O God, we seek to honor you as we serve one another in Christ’s name. May our offerings be an expression of genuine love, that reflects your love for us. Direct our use of the resources you entrust to us. May we may not only contribute to the needs of the saints, but also devote our lives to the building of a peaceable, world-wide community, in which all are valued. Amen.

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

When we give Jesus’ call – to follow him –
first priority in our hearts, words, and deeds,
the Holy Spirit will surely uphold us –
should occasions of cross-bearing – or self-denial –
result from our faithfulness.

BENEDICTION RESPONSE “God Be With You”

God be with you till we meet again.
May the good gifts God has given
Shine out through the life you’re livin’:
God be with you till we meet again.