

Sermon Title: Dying and Living in Christ
Text: Romans 12:9–21, Matthew 16:21–28
By: Rev. Terry Carty
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Place: Kingston Springs United Methodist Church
Season: Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 17

Main Point: Our self-will must give way to the will of God in our living.

Read Matthew 16:21-28 from 'The Message'

I died a little four times this week:

1. I apologized to someone who I had hurt deeply.
2. I visited with someone whose vital 23-year-old daughter had died suddenly of natural causes.
3. I had to tell someone "no" to a request they had made.
4. I visited with Tom Goad and suffered with him at some of his bad times.

I did not want to do any of those things. I very well could have prayed like Jesus did, "Lord, if it be your will take this cup away from me." But in each case, I pressed beyond my comfort zone.

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Fight or flight is our natural inclination. It is born into us. Right at the core of our brain is the brain stem. Some psychologists refer to this region of the brain as the "Reptilian Brain." It controls basic life functions: breathing, digestion, circulation, body temperature - and it controls our basic instinct when confronted with something that threatens us: the fight or flight instinct. These are not things that we usually think about - not things we decide to do - these are things that happen naturally for our very survival. These functions sustain living.

Some animals, when threatened, come out fighting. But most prefer to slip quietly away unnoticed - they prefer flight. People are not different from that. Some people come out fighting, and others avoid conflicts. We are hard-wired this way and cannot help feeling one of these responses.

When I was young I was more likely to respond by fighting than fleeing. As I got older I became reconditioned by the number of times I was losing the fight - avoidance proved to be much safer!

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This week I would have rather avoided every one of these occasions that brought me little bits of death. I am hard-wired that way. But I pushed ahead anyway. Admittedly I

pressed partly because some of these things are my job. But it was partly because as a follower of Christ, I struggle to understand what it means to 'deny myself, take up my cross and follow Jesus.'

Denying oneself goes counter-intuitive to the fight or flight instinct that we feel. We would not be able to do that at all had God not given us more brain than the reptiles and other lower creatures. We have all this other stuff up there so we can consider other options. We can apply logic that sometimes makes us run, sometimes makes us take a stand, and sometimes makes us not resist the work of God making us more compassionate, more forgiving, more loving.

When we first met Paul in the Bible (his name was Saul then) he was more of a fighter than a flee-er. He was brash and not prone to self-denial. But Paul's words that we heard from Romans are the words of a man who is becoming Godly. These are words give us cause to reconsider our basic nature: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'

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The little deaths that I have died this week are not killing me. Instead they are bringing me to a new living. In each instance have been dying a little to my base nature. I have been dying a little to the unconsidered action of my reptilian brain. And I have been trying to make decisions to take up whatever cross is mine and follow Jesus.

The cross of Jesus leads us to the death of our reptilian self and to the emergence of our fully human, God-like self. We go into threatening situations feeling the urge to fight or flee, but we utilize our amazing gifts to turn our suffering to assets of God's love. In this love we find the life that God has intended us to enjoy.

What will we face this week that will call for us to re-think our basic instincts? I don't know about you, but I have some things that I have been putting off. As they come to my mind, perhaps I should consider dealing with them and not letting nature take its course. And then there are the things that will come up this week - things that we do not expect - things that fall on us and we respond - things that become the crosses we bear. This week, let's press forward to take up these crosses and follow Jesus to the new life.