



*Surrounded!*  
**“KNIGHT OF FAITH:  
SOREN KIERKEGAARD”**

Rev. Gary Haller  
First United Methodist Church  
Birmingham, Michigan  
Scripture: Philippians 2:12-18

*Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

*Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you – and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.*

In the mid-1800's, Soren Kierkegaard wrote a parable about two robbers who entered a jewelry store and did something very strange: they switched all the price tags. They didn't steal anything. They just took the high-priced tags off the expensive jewelry and put them on the costume jewelry. Then they took the bargain price tags off the costume jewelry and put them on the really expensive stuff. The next day the jewelry store opened for business as usual. In fact, for the next several weeks no one noticed that folks were buying \$10,000 rings for a few dollars, and that others were buying \$9 necklaces for thousands of dollars. Kierkegaard thought it described his country well and our world well:

**“My point is obvious, isn't it? The people of my day have no ability to tell the truly valuable from the virtually worthless. Not just in commerce but in the world of ideas too our age is putting on a veritable clearance sale. Everything can be had so dirt cheap that one begins to wonder whether in the end anyone will want to make a bid.”**

And he wasn't talking about jewelry, but about that in life which really matters. What about us? Are we able to distinguish between the priceless and the commonplace, between that which counts from that which doesn't matter?

Soren Kierkegaard was a very unusual man whose writings literally changed the landscape of philosophical and theological thinking. So let me briefly fill you in on the skeletal structure of Soren Kierkegaard's life. Soren was born in May of 1814, of a distinguished father who, while growing up in poverty, made a fortune in Copenhagen, Denmark, and retired at age 40. His father, Michael, was a sternly religious man, a Lutheran as were all Danes, but greatly influenced by the Mennonites. Michael's house became a "host house" for the intelligentsia of Copenhagen. People like Hans Christian Anderson, J. L. Heiberg, the leader of the city's literary elite, scholar Hans Martensen and various philosophers would gather at their house, creating an atmosphere Soren loved.

Soren was a brilliant child and was sent to a Latin school. The school still has a student exercise book of his which showed that he didn't follow the rules. He would write pages of Latin words with Danish endings and, when criticized, he then would write Danish words with Latin endings. He excelled, but they could not well motivate him. He went on to graduate from the University of Copenhagen in a time when the great intellectual currents in Europe flowed through that city. He became part of the circle of intellectuals in downtown Copenhagen during that electric time. His father's wealth served him well when he was 21, a time he said when he "lacked an idea for which I can live and die." He lived the life of what he calls the "aesthete," living large, running up large wine bills, buying new clothes from England, wearing a large top hat an inch higher than anyone else. He liked good Cuban cigars.

So young Kierkegaard lived the life of a dandy. But his journals show something deeper, rich and thick. By 1836, Soren published his first book, criticizing a work of Hans Christian Anderson that he thought was wrong-headed. It brought him to the center of Copenhagen's literary world and people thought that he would become a critic, but he was already studying law and theology, settling on theology as the arena of deepest concern. He began to think of himself as one who wants to be a Christian, but he does not tell others about this.

There were many things going on in Kierkegaard's life at this time: he had an ongoing, tumultuous relationship with his father; he was engaged to be married to a socially prominent young woman, Regina Olson. Soren loved her very much, but when he would try to share his intellectual struggles with her, she would downplay them or suggest they simply take a walk together. She just could not understand the ideas he struggled with. He wrote:

**"Regina's spiritual struggles can be resolved by a box of candy or a bouquet of flowers. I wonder if I am perhaps a century too old for her."**

He broke off the engagement, basically because he knew that she would never cope with his immense inner tensions. Now, breaking an engagement was shameful, it just "was not done." He tried to make it easy for Regina by being a cad, going to the theater nightly, and buying new clothes. Regina, to her credit, saw through this act, as did many of his friends. So Kierkegaard left Copenhagen and went to Berlin. This was a great leap for him.

**"During the first period of a person's life the greatest danger is not to take the risk. To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself. It is quite true what philosophy says: that life must be understood**

**backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards. This takes a leap of faith.”**

In the intense atmosphere of Berlin, Kierkegaard began to write as if floodgates had been opened within him. He wrote 35 volumes in only nine years, between 1842 and 1851. He died when he was only 42.

So much for the externals of Kierkegaard’s life. To describe the impact of his thought, now, is one of the greatest challenges a preacher can face, for Soren Kierkegaard is one of the trickiest, most difficult-to-describe Christians ever to live. The great Kierkegaard scholar Paul Holmer says that “Kierkegaard is one of those rare men of reflection. He is too many-sided ever to be a founder of a school of thought.”<sup>1</sup> He is difficult to describe because he was not a system-building philosopher. He thought the philosophical systems of his day utterly misrepresented Jesus Christ. Hegel was the great systematizer of that time and his thought pervaded everything. Kierkegaard said of Hegel:

**“Reading Hegel is like reading from a cookbook to a starving man. He is full of great thoughts, but none of them can feed a man or woman’s soul or help them change how they live.”**

And truth that feeds your soul, thought Kierkegaard, is the only truth that matters. You won’t find it in any system. Truth is intensely personal. “Subjective,” he called it. As you read on our bulletin cover:

**“When you read God’s Word, you must constantly be saying to yourself, ‘It is talking to me, and about me.’”**

And the goal of this One, this God, who is speaking, is to change you.

**“What Christianity aims at decisively, is a total transformation in a person, to wrest from him through renunciation and self-denial all that to which he immediately clings, in which he immediately wants his life.”**

And Kierkegaard knew that this sort of religion, calling for us to be transformed, is not what we want. His point of focus is always on us as individuals living out our lives before God. So he did not try to translate Christianity into a great system of theology that is easy for one to state. Instead, he wrote stories set within stories as told by a fictitious writers. That is, he would create a person with an obviously made-up name like Johannes de Silentio, Judge Wilhelm, or Anti-Climacus and through them he would tell stories depicting the different modes of human life. Each of these authors is the embodiment of a particular mode of life, and we learn about the possibilities and limits of that life through that author. Truth, he said, cannot be put into straight-forward words. Truth must be told indirectly as in the parables Jesus used:

**“The religious and philosophical worlds are victims of a monstrous illusion that all matters of truth will be settled by scholarship, by science, by slowly**

**accumulating facts. But truth...must be stated indirectly in such a way that causes us to reflect upon how we are living our own lives before God.”**

To that end, he wrote parables, stories, just as we see in the New Testament, because we discern the pattern of our lives in those stories. He cried:

**“The crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, and to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die. Subjectivity is truth.”**

So Kierkegaard wanted to point people back to the New Testament, and his life is given with great enthusiasm to Christian things. He saw himself as a prompter, who did not want us to look at him, or at “big thoughts,” but tried to get us to pay attention to what is happening on the stage. And the true stage is what God is doing in Christ.

Here is one place where Kierkegaard’s thought may strike very close to how you and I live. While passionately striving to be a follower of Jesus Christ, Kierkegaard hated having an official “State Church” in Denmark. The church in Denmark was (and is) Lutheran. All Danes are born into the State Church, and thus, without a choice on their part, are automatically “Christians.” Kierkegaard believed that this reduced faith to nothing, and did away with radical conversion to Christ. He felt that “official Christianity” had departed so far from Christ that it needed to be torn down and rebuilt, not simply reformed. Yet he did not consider himself superior to others:

**“Never have I said: I am a true Christian; the others are not Christians, or probably even hypocrites. No, I have fought in this way: I know what Christianity is; I myself acknowledge my defects as a Christian, but I do know what Christianity is. And to come to know this thoroughly seems to me to be in the interest of every human being, whether one’s intention is to accept Christianity or to abandon it.”**

His insight was that his country was considered 100% Christian, but in reality they were Christian in name only. The demands of Jesus Christ did not touch them at all. They lived an easy, pleasure-filled life which contained no sacrifice or discipleship. Hence his story about the “thieves” switching the price tags in the jewelry store. Kierkegaard believed that his society could not tell the difference between the truly valuable from the virtually worthless – and he would say the same about us. We label ourselves Christian, but he would say we do not pick up the cross, and do not attempt to passionately follow Christ. He declared,

**“This generation will die not from sin, but from lack of passion!”**

Now, if you’ve followed me up to this point on Kierkegaard, I applaud you. Kierkegaard is tough. But he gave us a very helpful guide which he called the “stages of life” or “modes of life.” He tries show us that there are different ways of living. These modes of living organize and orchestrate our behavior, our hopes, needs, passions, desires and thoughts. Happiness and freedom and love are all defined differently in each stage. These stages are a map for our self-understanding and guide us to make what he calls the “leap of faith” to place our lives in God’s hands.

The ground-zero, first stage of life is the *aesthetic* stage. It is the stage of our simply seeking our pleasures and avoiding pain – it's the life Kierkegaard led when he was that "young dandy." There is no choice involved in this mode of life: we simply enjoy our pleasures. It may be eating chocolates, or the enjoyment of food, or cultivating one's taste in wine, the enjoyment of a good book, or the enjoyment of having others depend on you, or the pleasure you take in helping others. The aesthetic stage of life is the stage of enjoying your pleasures, no matter how refined and cultured they become.

The best way to see the aesthetic form is from the perspective of the *ethical* stage of life. The ethical stage of life is characterized by willing, by making hard decisions about how you live. The pleasure-seeking stage of life reflects no commitment or investment. Our choices make utterly no difference. But in the ethical stage, one becomes aware of the difference between good and evil and you realize that you have meaningful choices. When one moves into the ethical, you start to fashion a self because your decisions make a difference. Attempting to do good and avoid evil achieves something. It shapes us. We're not just sitting on the sidelines. Something is eliminated each time we choose, and something else is gained.

In the ethical mode, happiness is not mere pleasure. Happiness is not dependent upon wealth or weather or luck. If our happiness depends upon beauty, or money, or youthfulness, then it's not real happiness – because if one of these changes, our happiness dissolves. In the ethical mode, we are motivated by the choices we make out of love, mutual respect, and concern for the other. Like babies, we are born into the aesthetic, pleasure-seeking mode. But the ethical and other stages are attained by the choices we make.

But there is one other stage of life: it is the *religious mode* of existence. This is the stage which is the hardest to grasp, and the one who achieves it is the "Knight of Faith." Kierkegaard wrote that a true believer must be willing to leave everything for the sake of Christ and accept the consequences of his calling:

**"One must leave anger and vengeance, security and well-being, the approval of society and the vanity of achievement. This means that one must follow Christ, and Christ's love, no matter where they lead."**

Kierkegaard takes note of the rich young man who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. The discussion ends when Jesus tells him "Go and sell all of your possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, and then come, take up your cross and follow me." The religious element is not the giving away of everything to the poor – that would be an ethical move – rather it is the command to "take up your cross and follow me." The rich ruler can't do it. This call to surrender all and to take the "leap of faith" into the sphere of God seems absurd because, as Jesus taught, it means dying to one's self:

**"Therefore, death first! You must first die to every merely earthly hope, to every merely human confidence; you must die to your selfishness, or to the world, because it is only through your selfishness that the world has power over you. If you are dead to your selfishness, you are also dead to the world."**

**But naturally there is nothing a human being hangs on to so firmly, indeed with his whole self, than selfishness.”**

Each person who enters the religious mode of life, Kierkegaard calls a “Knight of Faith.” The Knight of Faith is one who gives themselves sacrificially to Christ without expectation of reward. She does what is right because it is right. More than that, though, she does it because our Lord asks it.

Externally, the Knight of Faith looks just like everyone else. The one difference is that the Knight of Faith obeys Christ’s command to follow him and thus makes the immense leap of renouncing the world. In this surrender he or she discovers a freedom previously unknown, and discovers that everything she had renounced is hers again in complete freedom and can be truly enjoyed for the first time. The Knight of Faith no longer lives for this pleasure or that. The Knight of Faith does not act out of duty or mere moral law. The Knight of Faith is that person who has surrendered all to Christ and thus found passionate purpose and true joy.

This is a small taste of the life of Soren Kierkegaard. As with all the people we’ve lifted up this summer, he is part of a great cloud of witnesses who seriously wrestle with following Christ. Kierkegaard wants us to reflect upon our lives, to see where we are, and to ask the essential questions that lead us to God. And so I invite you to be in prayer, as we think on these things before God.

May we pray?

Lord, I wonder: have the price tags on the important and unimportant things in my life been switched around? Do I really know what is most valuable in this brief life we lead? And, Lord, I ask you to help me understand the choices I have for how to live. Open my eyes that I may truly see. Am I living only to find things to enjoy? Am I beginning to grow dissatisfied with pleasures and seek a life of deeper significance? And I wonder, gracious God: am I simply committed to some idea about Christ, or am I willing to surrender my life to him, and thus follow him wherever he leads?” I may not have the answers, Lord, but I believe I’m asking the right questions. Guide me in the way you would have me go. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Paul L. Holmer, from lecture notes, Readings in Kierkegaard, Yale Divinity School.