

“Default Setting”

“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.”

Over the course of my years as a preacher, I have moved from writing my sermons on my trusty electric typewriter to a laptop computer with Microsoft Office 365. There are many advantages that computers have over typewriters; mistakes are much easier to correct, and you can save and send copies of documents very easily. But every time I open Microsoft Word to write even the simplest letter, I am met with my laptop’s “default settings,” *“the preexisting value of a user-configurable setting that is assigned to a software application, computer program, or device.”* Something that is done “by default” means that it will happen unless you change the setting or select another option. With my word processing program, it means that every time I open Word I need to make changes in its default setting to settings that I prefer:

- I change the font from “Calibri” to “Times New Roman,” and from 11 to 14.
- I change the justification from “Align Left” to even margins on both left and right.
- I change the space after the paragraph so that I have control over how my paragraphs are separated.

There’s nothing wrong with the default settings that came with my laptop; I simply prefer to customize my documents to fit my personal taste. But “default settings” are not confined to our technology; all of us have habits, customs, and traditions upon which we fall back naturally and usually without any conscious thought. It may be a morning routine that we follow every day, or family customs that are observed on holidays and special occasions. Default settings can be seen in cultural norms that are passed down from generation to generation, or “standard practices” that corporations expect their employees to follow. Default settings are means of maintaining and promoting the identity and viability of an organization or community, of perpetuating its *homeostasis*, *“the tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizing principles of its existence.”* (Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation*).

Even when a person, a community, or an organization experience dramatic change, there is still a tendency to fall back upon our “default settings,” to strive to maintain the *homeostasis* that has been the source of our stability and identity. This can be seen in today’s Gospel lesson in which Jesus is confronting the default settings that his disciples still carry with them even after they accepted his call to discipleship with all of its attendant changes and sacrifices. The opening words *“from this time on”* mark a turning point in Matthew’s Gospel; Jesus now turns inward to instruct his disciples, a focus that will continue through 20:34. In the midst of his closest followers, Jesus shares with them what awaits him when he reaches Jerusalem: *“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.”* (16:21). Jesus’ passion and the disciples’ following have already been presupposed and taught in 10:38: *“... and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”* Jesus does not present himself as a victim whose death is a tragedy; the suffering of the Son of Man is a necessity. God is the one who delivers up the Son of Man (*“The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.”* – 17:22-23) as God delivers up the Suffering Servant in Isaiah: *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”* (Isaiah 53:6). Both “be killed” and “be raised” are in the passive tense, making clear that Jesus does not “rise” on his own, but that his resurrection is the act of God.

As Peter had previously served as spokesperson for all of the disciples when Jesus asked them *“but who do you say that I am?”* (16:15), he once again takes the lead role in his response to Jesus’ passion prediction, taking hold of Jesus and rebuking him with prayer-like words: *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* (16:22). Peter’s “default setting” included an understanding of the Messiah that was far different from the one that Jesus is describing. He was the one who responded to Jesus’ previous question by proclaiming that the man from Nazareth is *“the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* (16:16). Jesus had praised Peter for this confession, locating the source of his words in God’s revelation and bestowing on him both a new name and place within the Church that Jesus will institute:

- *“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* – 16:17-19.

Peter’s objection can be understood as either a wrong understanding of messiahship or as an expression of his personal love for Jesus, or both. Peter *“was a Jew and could not fathom a Messiah who would give up his life just at the moment when he should be seizing the leadership of Israel.”* (Clayton Schmit). He speaks for all the disciples whose “default setting” does not include a suffering Messiah, and whose love for their Lord causes them to act with shock and horror at the thought of such a gruesome fate.

We have no way of knowing what response Peter was expect from Jesus after his rebuke, but we can assume that it wasn’t what Jesus would turn and say to him: *“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.”* (16:23). Jesus’ counter-response is to call Peter to renewed and deeper discipleship. The testing that Jesus had met and overcame in his initial encounter with Satan in the wilderness (4:1-11) was not a once in a lifetime experience but would reappear in the sincere but misguided rebuke of his disciple. The temptation to accomplish his ministry according to the “default settings” of how human criteria judge success is, in fact, a demonic temptation. Jesus’ mission is rooted in setting his mind on “divine things,” to inaugurate an alternative kingdom which includes a radically different way of exercising rulership and authority. The challenge for Peter and the disciples will be to understand that their call to discipleship includes a call to change their own “default settings” so that the “rock” upon which the new community of Christ will be built does not become a “stumbling block” (*skandalon*: *“... for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over – a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”* – Isaiah 8:14).

- *“Despite his revelation from God, Peter continues to think as good human beings are accustomed to think: reasonably, egocentrically, and in terms of human friendship and success.”* – M. Eugene Boring.

Sensing that all of the disciples are still operating under the “default setting” that is creating a stumbling block for him, Jesus gathers them for instruction on the meaning of discipleship for those who are already within the community, those who like Peter have made the Christian confession but are still *“thinking according to human standards rather than the divine revelation.”* These words are not an invitation to discipleship for outsiders, but reflection on the meaning of discipleship for those who have already responded to the call of Christ. Jesus’ announcement of the Son of Man’s own way to the cross is also the way the disciples must follow:

- *“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?”* – 16:24-26.

The giving of one's life (*psyche* – the true self, the living self) is a matter of commitment to the confession of Jesus as the Christ. Those who seek to preserve their lives by living selfishly end up actually forfeiting themselves (*"Truly, no ransom avails for one's life, there is no price one can give to God for it."* – Psalm 49:7). The decision about confessing or denying Jesus must be seen in an eschatological perspective:

- "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." – 16:27-28.

The nearness of the coming Kingdom of the Son of Man functions as encouragement for Jesus' disciples to follow the path of Jesus. *"Jesus' violent death is not a meaningless accident of history, but is part of God's plan ... Jesus was not a hapless victim but a knowing [and willing] partner in the divine strategy."* (Douglas Hare).

As Jesus spoke to his disciples about what it means to live as a person who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the words of our Lord speak to us this morning as people who confess the same Christian faith. While there are biblical texts that are addressed to persons outside of the Church who may seek an understanding of what Christians believe and teach, Jesus' words are addressed to us who have already made the confession of faith and through Baptism have been incorporated into the Church which is the Body of Christ. They are words that challenge us to consider what "default settings" we may need to change if we are to be faithful disciples, and warn us of the danger of falling back on beliefs, traditions, and practices which set our minds on human things and make us a stumbling block rather the rock upon which Christ will build his church.

- Our default setting which sees the church as an organization that exists for the benefit of its members, rather than a church that is the Body of Christ in mission to others.
- Our default setting which sees Jesus as a moral example to emulate, rather than as the Lord and Saviour of all humanity who *"is to die, not as an example of good behavior, but so he could rise again and reveal the incomprehensible power of God to change the world."* (Schmit).
- Our default setting which looks upon the church as a venue in which we can gain personal power, prestige, or status, rather than following our Lord's teachings that *"whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."* (Mark 10:44-45).
- Our default setting which looks upon the church as a preservation society for human traditions and customs that have been passed down from generation to generation, rather than the people of God whose are called to *"not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."* (Romans 12:2).

In one of his most famous writings, Dietrich Bonhoeffer teaches those who would follow Jesus that along with the *call* to discipleship comes the *cost* of discipleship. If we are to truly follow Jesus, it means leaving behind many of the default settings that have defined our lives and dictated the manner in which we once lived before we became children of God.

- "The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death – we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not a terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ." – *The Cost of Discipleship*.

It is not easy to give up the "default settings" that have defined our lives and given us a sense of stability and identity. But when we answer Christ's call to discipleship, we trust that whatever we leave behind will pale in

comparison to that which we will receive, because when we are incorporated into the Body of Christ we enter into a realm in which the “default settings” are those which have been set by our Lord to be a constant source of blessing for us and for others:

- The default setting in which we are justified by God’s grace, born anew to a living hope, and ensured that nothing *“will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:39).
- The default setting in which all of God’s people live in the confidence that we are *“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9).
- The default setting in which we live in the blessed assurance that our Lord and Saviour will once day *“come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”* (John 14:3).
- The default setting in which we believe and teach that *“at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”* (Augsburg Confession, Article VII).

As we are about to observe the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, we are called as Lutheran Christians to renew our commitment to the Lord and to living in accordance with the default settings that Christ set in place for his church in all ages, and not according to our own default settings which have far too often diverted the Church of Jesus Christ from its mission and purpose. The Church of Christ in every age is called to reformation, called to repent of its sins and faithlessness as it is renewed by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to be a faithful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The ongoing reformation of the Church is a call to take up our cross and follow Jesus in the path of discipleship, so that we might be a Church that exists *“to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to the world’s own manner and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise.”* (Karl Barth).

Later this week, I will once again sit down at my laptop to write next week’s sermon; and once again I will be met by the default settings that Microsoft installed on my word processing program. I’m free to change these to suit my own tastes and needs; but as a Christian and as a pastor of the church I must take care not to alter the “default settings” that Christ has set for each of us who through baptism were reborn children of God and made members of the Church which is the Body of Christ. As we walk as children of the light, let us take care that our default settings do not dictate the manner in which we live together as the people of God. We are God’s people now; let us take up our cross and follow the setting our Lord has set before us. Amen.