



104th Michigan District Convention 2025

Installation Service Message – Rev. David A. Davis

All right, here's what I wish I had thought of. I wish about Saturday I had thought ahead to preach on this verse, "And whoever gives even a cup of cold water..." <laugh> Too-late smart. Oh, well. God has been blessing us in our time of convention. We have some more work to do, but surely we're closer to the return part of the convention than the beginning. And we've been thinking about being nourished for the journey. Life is a pilgrimage. I like Psalm 84: "Blessed is he who has set his heart on pilgrimage going up to Jerusalem," but especially to the new Jerusalem. Our theme, we've talked about remembering, renewing, and now returning. And so we're going to look at this word from Matthew chapter 10. Those of you that came to Concordia back in the late 70s or early seventies, we always used to bet on how many words Merlin Pohl would have in his text. I've got too many, but this is the text:

"And whoever doesn't take up his life, take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. And anyone who finds his life will lose it. And anyone who loses his life because of me will find it." Our theme is the living dead, but in Christ, not like zombies. As we look at this text, I want to say Elijah had it right, sort of. He invited God to take his life that was right, sort of. It was in great despair. He was so discouraged he thought he'd be better off dead. That part was not so right, at least not in the way he was thinking. But the part about being better off dead was right. But in the way that Jesus talks about it. He says, "Whoever finds his life will lose it. And whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

We'll look at these couple of verses for just a few minutes as we think on these three themes: living our best life ever can be a death trap. Second point, how better off dead in Christ we are. And then finally, we'll talk about returning as the living dead. Again, not like zombies, but like Christians. Let's pray. Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, we pray that You would be with us now as we begin to turn our hearts, our minds, our cars toward home. Help us to be persistent yet in the work in front of us, but be prepared soon to return back home dead in Christ and alive in Christ to serve You by loving our neighbors. Be with us in these few moments, we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.

The section of Scripture that our text comes from is from Matthew chapter 10. And this was where Jesus was sending out the 12 apostles on their missionary journey. He said, "As you go, proclaim: 'The Kingdom of heaven has come near.'" That's the Gospel. That's the Gospel as Jesus said, the Kingdom of God has come near. That's good news. And he said, "As you go, proclaim that, heal people, cleanse people. He said it wasn't going to be easy. "Look, I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as serpents, as innocent as doves. He said, don't worry about what you're going to say. You're going to run into trouble. People will betray you." He says, "But don't be afraid. Don't fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul. Rather, he said, "Fear the one who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Aren't too sparrow sold for a penny? You're worth a lot more than those." He said, "If you acknowledge me before men, I'll acknowledge you before my Father." And then He says the words of our text: "And whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Anyone who finds his life will lose it. And anyone who loses his life because of me will find it."

Now, you know that the cross bearing that this is talking about, you know, this is not about some particular problem. My neighbor, that's my cross to bear, or this guy at work, or even an illness, a prolonged difficulty in your life, we often say, "that's my cross to bear." That isn't at all what Jesus is talking about. It might be part of it, but that isn't Jesus' point. What happens to people that bear a cross? They die!

Jesus was speaking to us about giving up our lives as we follow Him. Now, of course, that's not what the world has in mind. The world doesn't have in mind about giving up our lives. The world has in mind living our best life ever. People say that all the time. Maybe you've said that, oh, I'm living my best life ever. And that's what the world is about.

Living life to the fullest, doing this, having that, seeing this desire fulfill this goal and dream achieved, it ends up being a very self-centered way of life. It's all about me and what I want, what I like, my preference, my desire, my agenda. And when it's starting to click, we say, boy, I'm living my best life ever. You know, at the heart of that, that's all sin. Sin is about being focused on self and raising yourself up as God.

But here's the thing. Too often we—this is not about what the world does—too often, we, you and I, we scoop that same kind of thinking into our own lives. It's the air we breathe. How can we not become more and more self-focused about *my* life? Again, my desires, my wants, my preferences, how I think things ought to go. Too often we scoop that same kind of thinking into our laps as part of the air that we breathe, and we know better. We know that that's not the way of life at all. Jesus says, what is a prophet of man to gain the whole world, but lose his soul? And so what we want to think about and what Jesus is pointing off is that we're better off dead. We're better off dead in Him. He says, "Whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Anyone who finds his life will lose it. And anyone who loses his life because of me will find it."

He says, we're better off dead. We're better off dead *in Him*, that we join Him in His death. And from that, receive life, forgiveness, victory over the evil one. You know this from Romans chapter six. It says, "Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we were buried with him by baptism into death in order that justice Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father so too we might walk in newness of life." We're better off dead in Him for if we've been united with him in a likeness of his death. We will certainly also be united with him in a likeness of his resurrection. He says, if we died with Christ, we believe we'll also live with Him because we know that Christ having been raised from the dead will die no longer.

Paul writes, "So you too consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Jesus invites us to Him to die. To die to self, to die to confidence in ourselves and our own abilities and our own thinking about things. And to let His death cover us and let His death pay for our sins so that they can't be held against us. To let His death overcome our death. To let His death break the power of the evil one in our life, so that in His death we are indeed better off. In His death, when we die to self in Him, we have eternal life. When we die in Him, we become the family of God. We become priests. We become citizens of His royal Kingdom. When we die in Him, we have what He promises—life and that more abundantly. And so as we get ready to return, let's purpose ourselves to return into our various communities and homes and congregations as the living dead—that we are dead in Christ to ourselves, that old sinful nature, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. So that we might go out like Elijah. He was reminded. He was renewed in the communion of saints. And then he returned with vigor like Elisha who came after him. He, too went out and served the Lord with zeal.

May we die to self and go out and live for Christ to the world. Now, some of you might say, Hey, hey, didn't you say that's Matthew 10? Yeah, that's Matthew 10. Isn't that to the apostles? Isn't that to the 12? Isn't that just for them? And maybe pastors too, if they follow in their trade, and this is something that pastors, church workers, ought to do, not so fast. In Luke chapter 9 we hear these words: "And he said to all" [which in the Greek, that means all. <laugh> I think the same is true of the Hebrew, but my Hebrew's not so good.] He said, "He said to all, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me," that we would die to ourselves daily, each and every one of us, and live to the glory of God in the good of our neighbors.

I want to point out one other thing about this, since we're here representing congregations. I think this is something our congregations need to take a closer look at. I think our congregations need to take a closer look at dying. You know, we have in these days and age, we have declining congregations. We might describe them as well, "that's a dying congregation." Every congregation should be a dying congregation. Every congregation should be dying to itself and what it likes and what it in mind and what its heritage and its traditions are, that we would be willing to reach into our community and to receive new people. And you know what new people do when they come in? They change things. They make it different. They make it so that our church isn't like it just used to be. So we end up with our church having died, the church we knew and loved and all of those things we did. But that, that dead church is now alive, alive in Christ.

That doesn't mean throwing out everything you're doing. Don't overhear what I'm saying. But I am saying that you and I need to go out into our communities, through our congregations, and see what's the most our congregations

can do to give up of themselves to the glory of God and the love of those people around us. There is a word Jesus said in here. He said, "Whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." And you know this: When we say the word 'worthy' like that, it doesn't mean 'good enough.' It means 'equal to' or 'on par with.' And what Jesus is saying, I want you to go out on the same par as me. I want you to go out with the same Spirit as mine. Jesus didn't consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he made himself nothing. He took on that servant's nature as a man, and He became obedient to death, even death on the cross. He died that we might live. May we too die to self, to be used of God, to bring life to others individually and as congregations. Amen.