Counterintuitive Gospel

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I was grocery shopping with Chris recently. As I reached to select a dark roasted coffee, Chris remarked that dark roasted coffee has less caffeine than the light roasted coffee. Her words seemed counterintuitive. I would have expected dark roasted coffee to have more caffeine than light roasted coffee.

Counterintuitive is a relatively new word to our English lexicon. It came into being in 1955. Counterintuitive references something that is counter to intuition. It’s contrary to intuition and common sense.

When I took driver’s education, I was taught, in the event of a skid, to turn the steering wheel in the direction of the skid. This advice seemed counterintuitive to my way of thinking. My first instinct would be to hit the brake and cut the wheel in the opposite direction to resist the slid. But this will send your car into a tailspin.

People sometimes talk about relationship problems with me. How can I salvage my marriage or win my boyfriend or girlfriend back? My counsel often seems to belie common sense. Don’t plead or beg the person to come back. I advise them to give the other person space. I know it sounds counterintuitive, but it may well be the only way the other person will recognize whether or not it was a mistake to send you away in the first place.

Intuition leads me to believe the world is flat and stationary, but there’s plenty of empirical evidence to suggest that the earth is spherical and spinning. Common sense tells me that cold water freezes faster than hot water. Yet, more often the reverse is true; hot water freezes faster than cold water. So many things run counter to common sense.

Many of Jesus’ teachings strike me as counterintuitive, also. Many of his words appear, on the surface, to be illogical and nonsensical. Consider Jesus’ words, “If someone strikes you on the right cheek offer this person your left cheek also.” What about Jesus’ beatitude that “the meek will inherit the earth?” What do you make of Jesus’ cryptic words, “If you want to save your life you must lose it and any who lose their life for my sake and the gospel will save it?” Come again?

Today’s lesson provides another example of Jesus’ counterintuitive gospel. Jesus
and his disciples are seated at a table sharing in the “Last Supper” together. His disciples are oblivious to the fact that it will be their least meal with Jesus. In the course of the meal, Jesus takes bread from the table and says, “This is my body broken for you.” He then raises a cup from the table, announcing, “This cup is the new covenant in blood.”

You and I have the benefit of hindsight to know what Jesus means, but put yourself in the sandals of these 12 disciples. What on earth is Jesus talking about, “This is my body broken for you” and “This is my blood shed for you?”

Jesus predicts one whose hands are on the table will betray him (Luke 22:21). This sends the group into something of a panic. Who would do such a thing? Evidently, Judas is not a shoo-in for such a dubious distinction. This would explain how their conversation morphs from name-that-traitor to I’m-the-greatest disciple. If you’re trying to protect your reputation, you might be tempted to tout your own greatness. How incongruous that Jesus talks about his broken body and shed blood at the same time his disciples argue over greatness.

This isn’t the first time Jesus’ disciples argue over greatness. Earlier in Jesus’ ministry, Luke writes about his disciples arguing over greatness. Jesus places a child in their midst and announces, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me, for the least among all of you is the greatest” (9:48).

Jesus reminds his disciples, in our lesson, of the predilection of kings to lord it over their subjects (22:25). “But it must not be so among you, the greatest must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves” (22:26).

This phrase, “one who serves,” is repeated three times in consecutive verses in our lesson. Repetition functions as the Bible’s way of underlining. Any time you find a word or phrase repeated in a passage pay close attention to it.

Jesus asserts in verse 26, “The leader must become like the one who serves.” In verse 27 Jesus asks rhetorically, “Who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves?” Then in verse 28, Jesus summarizes his remarks this way, “But I am among you as the one who serves.”

Robert Greenleaf worked for AT&T for years in various leadership roles. During his tenure, he developed a growing suspicion that the authoritarian leadership style so prevalent in American companies wasn’t working well. His research led him to take an early retirement and write an essay in 1970 entitled, The Servant as Leader, in which he introduced to corporate American the term “servant leader.” In his books on the same theme, he
challenged the all-too-common business paradigm that power and control are integral to leadership. He put forward the notion that a leader’s first job is to serve others. Leaders who put others first, who are committed to help people discover their full potential, create trust in an organization, which is good for business.

Jesus was the quintessential servant leader. He not only taught servant leadership, he lived it. Each year about this time, we rehearse the last week in Jesus’ life. We’ll come together on Maundy Thursday to commemorate the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples. We return on Good Friday to recall Jesus’ death on a cross. We’ll reassemble next Sunday to celebrate Jesus’ triumph over death and his victory over the grave. This afternoon, we’ll offer the 2nd and 3rd movements from Handel’s Messiah. The music tells the improbable story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. The last week of Jesus’ life represents the epitome of servant leadership.

Everything is upside down in this story. We expect rulers to rule, not serve. Roman emperors exert a top down authoritative leadership style. Jesus’ leadership is paradoxical and counterintuitive to the world’s way of leading.

In our story, Jesus enlists disciples in his service. Let me take it a step further. Jesus is still enlisting disciples in his service.

You may recall the famous Socratic maxim, “Know thyself.” For the first 19 years of my life, I expended lots of energy on knowing myself. I tried various identities in high school and college to find one that would fit. I became a jock, a good student, an average student, a dutiful son, a rebellious son, a ladies man, you get the drift. I have heard it said that growing old isn’t for sissies. Neither is navigating your way through the perils of adolescence.

The central ambition of my life in those early years could be summed up in a single existential question: Who am I? Yet, I found myself at 19 asking another colossal question: Who is God? Despite being raised in the church, somehow I hadn’t gotten the memo that the most essential anthropological question (Who am I?) is related to the most fundamental theological question (Who is God?).

I had a profound conversion experience of opening my life to Jesus Christ. I call my conversion profound in the sense that it radically altered the trajectory of my life. I changed my major, my values, my priorities and my career aspirations. I assumed a whole new identity. I now belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

I discovered during this period of my life (which continues to this very day) two essential
truths about myself. First, I discovered that I am loved by God. Sure, I had heard this message early-on in Sunday school, but somehow it didn’t stick. I now became aware, in the depths of my being, that I was loved by God fully and unconditionally. This love isn’t contingent on good behavior. If you struggle with whether God really and truly loves you, remember this one thing. If God loves you as you are, there is hope that you can do the same.

The other reality I have to experience time and again is that I am deeply flawed. I was pretty adept at seeing other people’s sins, but somehow my own sins and shortcomings were harder to recognize and accept. When I came to Christ and realized I was loved by God, I was free to admit that I was a sinner in desperate need of God’s grace.

Don’t you see? Knowing God and knowing self go together. They are mutually connected and inseparable. John Calvin begins his monumental treatise on the Christian life entitled, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, this way: “There is no deep knowing of God without a deep knowing of self and no deep knowing of self without a deep knowing of God.” The deep knowing of God becomes the catalyst for knowing yourself just as the deep knowing of self provides the means by which we can know God.

I leave you with five suggestions for your consideration:

First, give yourself to this Jesus. Give as much as you know about yourself to as much as you know about Jesus. Open your heart and soul to him. Invite Jesus to make his home in your heart.

Second, try your hand at writing a mission statement for your life. Write about what you value. Describe your purpose in living. Stephan Covey advises us, in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, to begin with the end in mind. There’s plenty of help on the internet to help in writing a personal mission statement.

Third, discuss your mission statement with someone who knows you well. Ask a trusted friend whether your mission statement is congruent with your life.

Fourth, take the spiritual gifts inventory on our website. This may help you discern where you are best at serving. God has created you with unique talents and gifts to be used in his service.

Fifth, pray St. Augustine’s prayer every day for two weeks. “May I know you, may I know myself” (Novem te, novem me).