

Sermon Pentecost 13A
All Saints Lutheran Church
Rev. Ginger Litman-Koon
August 30, 2020

Matthew 16:21-28

From that time on, [after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah,] 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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “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.” Then Jesus told his disciples, “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? “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.”

+ + +

For many of our students, this is the last week of summer! In fact, our students got three extra weeks of summer! But, unlike other summers, I bet they’re actually really ready for it to be over. I bet they are just ready to get to do something besides what we’ve been doing since March 14th. The idea of sitting through classes has never seemed so exciting. And while class on a computer screen is far from normal, for many students, at least you’ll get to interact with someone who doesn’t live in your house! Woohoo! Friends! Classmates! and Teachers! Oh my!

When a new semester of classes looms, students can often be found conferring with others who’ve already had their teachers. They want to know “Is she nice?” “Does he grade hard?” or “How much does class participation count?” Students feel more confident going into a new class with an understanding of what the instructor is looking for. Some survivors of a particular course may share: “Always do your homework,” or “Make sure you take a lot of notes.” Or, my personal favorite, “They like it when you ask questions.” I never had a problem meeting that criteria.

This week in the Gospel of Matthew, we find Peter and the other disciples learning first-hand what it takes to stay “on the good side” of their Teacher and Lord, Jesus. Peter finds out the hard way what Jesus requires of his followers. He had no one else to turn to, no one to pass along advance notes or pointers. He was in the very first “class” of disciples called from the shore in Galilee. And Peter finds out in a bit of an embarrassing episode this week that just because you get accolades from the Teacher one week, it doesn’t mean you’re always going to be the teacher’s pet.

Last week, we heard Jesus praising Peter for being the only one to get the answer right to the question, “Who do you say that I am?” When Peter answers that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus calls him up to the front of the class and proclaims “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” “On this rock I will build my church.”

Quite the gold star, wouldn't you say! But this week, when Peter speaks out of turn, denying Jesus' destiny to meet suffering and death in Jerusalem, Jesus shows real quick that that kind of behavior will not be tolerated among his disciples. Rebuking Jesus for his commitment to the cross gets Peter demoted from solid rock down to stumbling block.

Last week, we saw Peter riding high on the fact that not only did he correctly identify Jesus as the Messiah, but everyone knew that HE was Jesus' right hand man. Peter had taken a risk to leave everything and take a leadership role among the followers of this itinerant prophet, and looked it was going to pay off - turns out he really is the Messiah! But Jesus quickly shoots down any idea that being in tight with the Messiah means power, glory or a life of ease. Jesus puts Peter in his place for precisely the reason of "setting your mind on human things," not divine.

Jesus is trying to tell them that the time has come to blow this Galilean pop stand and head on to Jerusalem, the seat of culture, fashion and power! But it won't be to take his seat on a throne, It will be to take his place on the cross. Once Jesus' identity as the Messiah is revealed, he wastes no time delving into the cold, hard truth - that living out that identity means suffering, betrayal and death, In the most gruesome of fashions And in the most public of settings. If the disciples weren't given advance notice of what following Rabbi Jesus would really be like, it was coming into focus for them now.

Whenever I read this exchange between Peter and Jesus, who exclaims, "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." I always wonder: Is Jesus actually calling Peter Satan here? Or is he turning his attention from Peter and talking to Satan? Well clearly Peter is the "you" who was "setting his mind on human things." So he must also be the "you" who he's calling a stumbling block... which is the same one he addresses "satan" So...yeah. Harsh, Jesus. Don't you think?

Maybe he's not literally labeling Peter as the Devil, But he's definitely labeling Peter's impulse here as satanic. And it's not just a general accusation of "evil." What Jesus hears from Peter here echoes closely what he heard from Satan during his temptation in the wilderness. Remember that? In the wilderness, the temptations Satan put before him are the lure of bodily satisfaction, of status & power, of earthly glory. Satan tempts Jesus with empty promises of "human things" but Jesus overcomes by setting his mind only on the divine.

So Peter's attempt to turn Jesus away from the cup of suffering set before him is a trial Jesus has already had to undergo in the wilderness. Peter is the most prominent of Jesus' disciples, but in this rebuke, he hears exactly what he needs to hear: "Get behind me." Peter needs to get back where disciples belong: behind Jesus - following Jesus. When disciples forget their place, and they try to get out in front, they only become a stumbling block to the way of the Lord.

When Jesus' true identity is revealed, and he sets his sights towards Jerusalem, There's no use denying it There's no dancing around it. It's time to face the truth of the cross. The hour of Jesus' glorification is coming, but if you view the cross through the lens of things human, You'll miss it. This glory will only be revealed through the lens of the divine. The cross. This is the way. This is God's way. Not just for the Rabbi, But for all who would call themselves disciples.

"If any want to become my followers," Jesus says, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." That's what followers do. The disciples' job, as we heard with Peter, is to get behind Jesus, and follow him... all the way to the cross. We're all about following Jesus! As disciples, we're proud to call ourselves followers of Christ! When Jesus is teaching, we're there, listening, learning. When he's healing, we're there, wondering, offering aid. When he's serving, we're following right in his footsteps ready to take up the towel ready to get down on our knees and wash feet just like Jesus.

But true followers of Jesus don't just follow the way he lived. Jesus tells us today that true followers must also follow in the way he died. No, we are not also going to be put to death for the sins of all - That role was Jesus', the Messiah - once, and for all. But, Jesus says, there are so many more crosses to bear For each and every one of his disciples. His cross was made of wood and nails. Yours it might be made of sweat and toil. Or it might be comprised of precious time and treasure Or it might be like humility and unceremonious self-sacrifice.

For those who can follow him and bear the cross - and I'm not talking not the burdens that an abusive other or the loathing of self can pile on your your shoulders and call a cross - that's not the cross - I'm talking about the self-giving cross of Christ, taken up for LOVE's sake - to them will be revealed the glory of God. That is where, Jesus says, true life is found. In God. In the way of Christ. And that free, glorious new life starts here and now, when we lay down what the world calls living and cling to the cross of Christ.

If any new followers came to hear Rabbi Jesus and asked the disciples, "What does he expect?" after this lesson, the only acceptable response would be, "Everything." Jesus is showing his disciples that what they stand to gain under his tutelage is **everything**, but first, they have to be ready to let go of everything that bears any resemblance to the temptation of the trappings of earthly comforts, addictions, obsessions, or the seduction of status to clear the way for the Glory of God about to be revealed on the cross.

Peter was about to be a part of something that would go down - not just in history but go down *in Scripture*. He was about to bear personal witness to the greatest miracle of all time - the Resurrection of Jesus Christ - the single event that would change the world forever. But he wasn't going to get there without the cross He wouldn't get the shock of the empty tomb, the rejoicing in the upper room, the birth of the church, the initiation of the blessed community through which each and every one of us was washed into new life... without the suffering to come.

If we, like Peter, want to truly follow Jesus, If we want to live into the call of discipleship even into the call to take up the cross then like him, we have to learn what it means to let go. To deny ourselves, to reject the satanic temptation of the empty promises of this world, the lure of status, the addictions, the self-interest... If we are truly going to be free to take up the cross, We first have to lay down all the other stuff that takes up so much time and space in our lives and gets in the way of Jesus.

So, what is it for you? What gets in the way of Jesus, in your life? What's stopping you from growing in your discipleship? Or maybe from just making that first step to transition from churchgoer to true disciple? And what is it for us, as a congregation? What does it look like for us as All Saints Lutheran Church to carry the cross? What does self-denial look like, for us together? What do we need to learn to let go of, what do we have move beyond in order to be able to truly, as we claim to do, lift high the cross?

We say we are disciples. We say we follow. But how far are we willing to go? What boundaries are we willing to cross to keep going, keep following, keep discipling, walking in the footsteps of the one who let nothing stand in his way of showing the world his love? When others come here and ask us, "What does it take to follow this Teacher?" Will we be able to show them our work, our life together, and say, "We've given him everything."