

Sunday: Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: August 30, 2020

Text: Matthew 16:21-28

Title: Take up the Cross

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

In Matthew's Gospel, there are two times when Jesus "turns a corner" you might say. In Matthew 4:17 we read, "From that time Jesus began to preach" and in Matthew 16:21 Matthew writes, "From that time Jesus began to show". Matthew 4 marks the beginning of Jesus Galilean ministry, and Matthew 16 begins Jesus final journey to the cross.

Last week we talked of Peter's inspired confession of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Words given to him by God the Father. This confession of the Christ, for himself and on behalf of the rest of the disciples, had been long in coming. They had been with Jesus for over two years and finally it had been revealed and believed that Jesus was truly the Messiah promised by the Prophets. This confession of Jesus identity and unity with the Father, while heartfelt and profound, lacked true knowledge of what work of the promised Messiah truly was

As Jesus turns the corner, begins the trek to Jerusalem and the completion of his redemptive work, he begins to teach explicitly what the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah looked like.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16:21)

In the unexpected ways of God, this means that Jesus, who is Lord of creation, must yield to those who oppose him. He must suffer the unjust fact of vicarious suffering and death. Only in this way, by God's design, can God's people, all people, and all creation be saved from sin and its henchman, death. After dying, the Christ will rise to eternal life, and this sequence can neither be changed nor interrupted. It is a path of submission, death and resurrection.

Jesus prediction of what lie ahead was a shock to the disciples. Jesus was loved by the masses. He was the powerful Son of God, who healed people of their illnesses, chronic conditions, cast out demons, restored broken bodies, and gave hope. He proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, calling people to repentance and faith. The revelations of Jesus that he must suffer, and die were the exact opposite of their expectations for restoration of Israel. These faithful men could not wrap their minds around this revelation.

Wide-eyed, mouths hanging open, they struggled to come up with words to express their shock. The whole idea of this is contrary to the “wisdom” of the ages. Prosperity and ease were the rewards of faithful service to God. How could his Son, who is being obedient to his Father, suffer this kind of fate? Isn’t the Messiah supposed to restore the kingdom of David, now? Surely, the Son of God would not suffer. He is God after all.

The minds of the disciples froze when Jesus said he would be killed. Hearing this first prediction of his passion, was so shocking, they did not grasp the words Jesus spoke after it. They did not hear Jesus first resurrection prediction. Jesus announced both his death and resurrection to the disciples that day, but they did not “get it.” In fact, if we were to look at the accounts of Easter Morning, we recognize that they did not get the resurrection predictions of Jesus, until after he rose from the dead. Even then it was not until that night that it really came home to them.

In response to the words of Jesus regarding his suffering and death, Peter, on behalf of all the disciples, takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Peter, a follower of Jesus, stops following Jesus and begins to direct him in the way he would have Jesus go. Peter says, “Far be it from you, Lord!” Basically, he is saying this must not happen. You must not suffer; you must not be abused by the elders and chief priests and scribes; you must not be killed.

Peter’s rebuke resembles the temptations Jesus endured in the wilderness.

- Turn these stones into bread, you must not suffer
- Throw yourself of the temple, the angels will protect you, you don’t need to die.
- Bow down and worship me and I will give you the kingdoms of the world and their glory, you don’t need to give up everything. You can have it all.

Jesus responds to Peter, “Get behind me Satan!” Jesus chastises Peter for his words. Words that are the work of the temptation of Satan. Words that reflect the false notion that if one is truly favored by God, they will be free of suffering. Jesus chastises Satan for his efforts to subvert the mission of salvation through Peter.

Peter is not alone in his way of thinking. All of Jesus’ disciples, past and present, are prone to this misunderstanding of the Christ. We don’t perceive accurately his road or the road that we who follow him are to walk. The disciples did not know what it would mean for God to reign through his Anointed One. They did not understand what it would mean for the Christ to accomplish the work that he was sent to do. The rebuke of Peter provides Jesus with the opportunity to correct Peter and the disciples and is the perfect point to begin teaching them what the life of a disciple will look like.

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Matthew 16:24).

Following Jesus is not an easy road to traverse. It is not a path free from suffering and pain. It is a constant struggle as Christians are called to deny themselves and come after Jesus. It is a path of submission, death and resurrection. Every day “the things of men,” the things of the world around us are allied against God’s plan in Jesus. The enemy lies within the heart of every disciple.

Two tendencies come to mind in Peter’s rebuke. First is the tendency to think—and insist—that God’s way of dealing with the world and its evil should conform to our way, that is, a way of power and success. If evil really is evil, should not the God of Israel, the Creator all things, simply come forth in might and overcome it. Moreover, shouldn’t Jesus disciples be allowed to be participants in such work, separating wheat from chaff and uprooting the sons of the evil one? God’s mysterious answer is, simply, no. The Christ himself will not deal with the world in that way—at least not yet. To deny ourselves means that we will not assume or believe that God’s way of working in the world will conform to our expectations or definitions of success or efficiency or glory.

The second tendency is related to the first. It is the tendency for us to insist that God work in humanly powerful ways, so that the disciple can accomplish what he believes should be done on earth. God must restore his rule, restore the Davidic line, in the here and now. Dwelling inside each disciple is ambition that can do untold damage in the name of Christ. Peter sought to redirect God’s plan of salvation by means of Jesus suffering, death, and resurrection, to something more

palatable. He wanted something now; something tangible; something that led to earthly power, as Jesus brought the kingdom of heaven to Israel.

The way of Jesus, however, is the way of humble obedience and submission to the will of Another. Jesus chose the way of service and obedience and suffering for the sake of Israel and the world. Now he calls every disciple—every Christian—to look at the darkness within. Deny the selfish desire to having it our way, whenever and wherever it shows itself.

After turning away from our desires, we can rightly be obedient to Christ as he says each follower must “take up his cross.” This is something we must do each and every day. In the most general terms, the daily struggles with sin and self-denial is a form of taking up the cross. No matter how Jesus’ disciples live their lives and speak in his name, they will come up against trouble and evil in this world. By turning away from exerting power in these situations, Jesus’ disciples will open themselves to various kinds of attack and shame and harm, depending on the context. The Messiah’s cross was inevitable, specific, and necessary to God’s plan for saving people from their sin. The cross that any given disciple may carry—that is, the suffering that he or she experiences for the sake of Christ—will vary. The point is to relinquish control from the beginning and again each day that a disciple lives. To take up the cross begins when disciples acknowledge that discipleship will entail hardship precisely because this is God’s way of reigning graciously in a rebellious world—not paying back evil with evil, but evil with good.

Many Christians in the world today are painfully confronted with the reality of cross-bearing. In North America, for the most part we have been spared these challenges, but times they are “a changin’”. Each person undoubtedly has situations where their faith is challenged, or they experience difficult times because they follow Jesus. As our country continues to slide into self-centeredness and depravity, we will see greater challenges and more circumstances for cross-bearing. When “truth” is democratized and relativized, then the absolute divine truth of Jesus, which society deems to be intolerance, will lead Christians to be labeled intolerant. The exclusive call of Jesus to “follow me” is increasingly offensive to religious pluralism. As followers of Jesus we must reckon with and accept his calling to be resisted and resented by the world for our conviction that Jesus is unique and that he alone is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Why is it that every disciple will (and must) embrace self-denial, cross-bearing, and in so doing follow Jesus? Matthew 16:25 answers that question. To seize control and power in order to protect oneself from suffering—in other words, to want to save your own life—ultimately results in the loss of everything. Jesus tells us to trustingly relinquish control and power and simply follow him. Doing so results in one finding life, both now and forever.

In this departure from our natural inclination to control our lives and our destiny, we are not left alone. As we see the Christ who leads us in the way of suffering as he gave himself over to the chief priests, scribes and pharisees to be tried, beaten, mocked and wrongfully convicted. Through it all he placed his trust in the Father, Our Father. Jesus did not protect himself from the Roman authorities who questioned him and condemned him to death on a cross. Instead, he embraced the plan of salvation and went to the cross, to his death, as an innocent man.

Jesus sacrifice for us is the victory over sin and the devil. In his resurrection he conquers death. Sin, death, and the Devil defeated by the submission of Christ to God's wrath. Wrath poured out on account for our sins. Christ did this for us. This is Christ for us. Christ for you and Christ for me.

This victory opened the way for the sending of the Holy Spirit to give us faith in our Lord. In the promises of Jesus, we have life eternal. By his vicarious atonement for our sins, we have forgiveness. By his rest in the tomb he sanctifies the grave for us. By his resurrection he shows us where this journey of cross-bearing leads. It leads to the bodily resurrection and a place at the marriage feast of the Lamb.

As we take up our cross and follow Jesus, we are not alone. Jesus is with us always. As Jesus has replaced the brick and mortar temple of the first century with himself, he has now brought that temple into our hearts as we cling to him in faith.

May we as brothers and sisters in Christ, bear with one another as each of us bears our cross and follows Jesus, providing support and encouragement as the family of God.

Amen