

Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21
13th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)
August 30, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinerop, AZ

INI

Peter stands again this week as a model Christian. He's not the type of model to emulate, however. Rather today we are seeing that other side of Peter that was mentioned last week, the side of Peter that acts and speaks without knowing, without understanding. Last week Peter boldly confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God. But as we see this week, Peter's understanding was woefully inadequate. And make no mistake about it; Peter did recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Peter rightly recognized Jesus as God in the flesh. But the thought of God dying was absolutely perverse and unacceptable to good ol' St. Peter.

It's understandable. Who of us wouldn't rebuke a friend or family member or even a mere acquaintance if they said they were planning their own death? But, think about that for just a minute. It's a bold move. Peter is the one whose mouth just confessed that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. Then, just five verses later, that same Peter is chewing out the Son of the Living God. And it becomes painfully obvious to us that the title "Christ" means one thing to Jesus and something entirely different to Peter.

Jesus' plans were not matching up with Peter's plans and ideas and understandings of what salvation in Christ Jesus truly meant and entailed. And, in addition to contradicting Jesus (which is never a good idea), Peter's opposition to Jesus' death prevented him from considering the resurrection. Jesus was clear. Not only would He suffer and be killed, but He would "...on the third day be raised." But Peter found no comfort in the resurrection. He was too disturbed by the suffering.

And if we're honest, the thought of God dying is perverse and unacceptable to us too. We are disturbed by the suffering also. Oh, we'll argue that *we* understand it. On this side of Easter, we can easily see the necessity of the Cross. We know we can't have Easter without Good Friday. But what happens when we are confronted with the cross, when it comes to us in our own lives? We Lutherans emphasize the suffering and death of Jesus with good reason. These are the means and method by which our sins are paid for. But maybe we should pay a little more attention to how strongly scripture also speaks of the cross of those who follow Jesus. When Jesus calls us to take up our cross and to suffer for others with Him, He means it!

Following the ponderings of one pastor several years back, let me ask you this. What would you think if I told you I wanted to change up a few things here to try to bring in more people? What would you think if I told you I wanted to change the sign we have alongside the road to read, "Come to Shepherd of the Mountains and Die?" What if I put in the bulletin each Sunday, "Take up your cross and die?" What if every Sunday, instead of wishing Christ's blessings upon you before leaving, I stood up front and said, "follow Jesus this week, and die?" Rev. Mark Schlamm, 2011

What a brilliant advertising campaign! *That* will fill in the pews. *That* will fill up the offering plate. Hopefully you notice the sarcasm there. That would prove your pastor is crazy! We don't use that kind of message because it doesn't appeal to anyone's natural senses. What the Lord spoke of concerning Himself was not what anyone expected. The disciples certainly weren't expecting to hear it. They didn't want to hear it. They weren't yet ready for the Cross, Jesus' cross or their own.

In 2014, I went with a small group of students to NYC for a class on urban ministry. One of the churches we visited was the Church of the Holy Cross in Midtown Manhattan. Just 11 years prior they had had a couple of burglaries. In August of 2003, first a metal money box was stolen from beside the rack of votive candles. Then three weeks later, a 4-foot tall, 200 lb, plaster rendering of Jesus was stolen from the crucifix near the front door. "They just decided, 'We're going to leave the cross and take Jesus,'" said David St. James, the caretaker who helped maintain the sacristy. "We don't know why they took just him. We figure if you want the whole crucifix, you take the whole crucifix." New York Times, 2003 In other words, if you want Jesus, you take His cross too.

"If anyone would come after me," Jesus says, "let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will

find it.”

But what does that mean, to take up one’s cross, to lose one’s life for the sake of Jesus and His Gospel? Later, Peter and many of the others would know in a very real way what that meant—physical death, martyrdom. In our American context it is harder to relate to the experience of the disciples (although that may change in the future.) But, even before their crucifixions, beheadings, stonings, and so forth, along the way there was cross bearing and self-denial.

When Jesus speaks of His disciples bearing a cross, He is not speaking of the regular experiences everyone goes through in a world plagued by sin—illnesses, family squabbles, economic hardships, injuries and so forth. He’s not even talking about death. Even non-Christians experience these things. And non-Christians do not bear crosses, not in the sense that Jesus is prescribing. Instead, He is talking about those things we suffer simply because we are Christians and striving to follow Jesus in the way He wants us to live.

And what an honor it would be for any one of us to be martyred for our faith, to bear a literal cross—unpleasant, but an honor! To stand in the face of enemies boldly proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ. I think most Christians have pondered such an event. As Lutherans, those of us who have been confirmed in the faith even have boldly promised that we would face such a death for the sake of Jesus. That’s part of the rite of confirmation, that we promise *to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death, and to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it.*

I’ve fantasized about it, having my own sort of “here I stand” moment, boldly trusting in the resurrection in the face of a martyr’s death. But I wonder...when so many of us, myself included, struggle with even the basics of Christian living and cross bearing. I wonder...

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I wonder...if following Jesus means bearing these little crosses, and we struggle even with them...I wonder. It’s so much easier to be right and wise in our own minds, to argue our point of view, what we know rather than to live peaceably. It’s so much more pleasant to surround ourselves with people we like and admire and who will think us wise. It’s so much easier to consider an enemy nothing more than an enemy, never seeking reconciliation, never praying or concerning ourselves with his/her welfare. Denying ourselves in the way that God’s Word requires often makes us look weak and foolish, like the underdog. And nobody wants that. It’s not appealing to our natural senses.

We often refer to our Gospel reading for this morning as one of Jesus’ “Passion predictions.” And isn’t that telling. We see it in Peter. And we see it in ourselves. It’s hard to focus on all of Jesus’ words when the cross is so powerful. Yes, the Christ had to **go to Jerusalem and suffer many things...and be killed.** But He didn’t end His prediction there. **“...and on the third day be raised”** He concluded.

It’s a package deal. You can’t have Easter without Good Friday. And if you don’t have Easter, well Good Friday is just Ordinary Friday. But it was the mission of the Christ to overcome our evil with good. It was the mission of the Christ to deny Himself as He heaped fiery coals of forgiveness upon us. It was the mission of the Christ to not take vengeance upon His persecutors and captors or us, but instead to take upon Himself the Father’s vengeance as He prayed for them and us, to let the Father’s wrath crush Him on Calvary, so that we would never be crushed.

Let us never forget that the crosses we bear are nothing compared to the cross of Jesus Christ. But bearing our crosses we are reminded of His cross. Enduring our sufferings big and small we are reminded of His great suffering. And let us never forget His full promise does not end with a cross but with a resurrection. Following Him in the way of the Cross leads to His empty tomb...and ours. Amen.