

Follow Him... in the Forgiveness of Sins
Matthew 16:21-28
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 30, 2020

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

Our text, Jesus says to the disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last week we heard the 'recipe' of how Jesus would build His Church – He would build it on the confession that He is the incarnate God and such confession and hope in Him would bring his sacrificial justification right into the faithful's lives in the regular and heavenly-weighted forgiveness of sins through proper wielding of Law and Gospel: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed on heaven."

So, if this is the foundation and life of His Church, Christ must go to Jerusalem and seal that foundational rock with his death. He *must* do it because that's what our sin requires. There is no other road to salvation; no self-improvement and fervent wrestling will ever make us worthy before God. And no denial of our need, no pretending the holy God's threat is in vain, will ever grant us escape. Christ must go to Jerusalem because this is the only way; this is the gracious God's designed and planned way... even from the first utterance of it in Eden... the design of that justification once earned that it may reach into the far corners of the earth to be individually

applied. This is what human history is built around, and this is what all of human history needs. This death of Christ is what sin and the forgiveness of sin, the very foundation of the Church's life and hope, requires: there is no binding and loosing without the sacrificial payment and earned authority to do so.

This, Jesus now – for the first time – tells his disciples plainly: “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things... and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Such an event must happen, for without it there is no foundation of justification. Such a sacrifice must ever remain the central focus of the Church, for without it there is no forgiveness, life and salvation. And, so, the work of the cross, the sacrifice of Christ, his taking upon himself the sin of the world... this is our everlasting icon and joy... not because we rejoice in a dead Christ, but because from that sacrifice comes his resurrection, life and victory over every enemy... and He has promised to attach us to all that is His by his Word and Sacrament.

Thus, our hunger and thirst for righteousness is satisfied when we, with Jeremiah, cry, “O Lord, you know; remember me and visit me... Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name.” Called by His name in baptism and linked to the saving work of his suffering and death *forever*.

But sinners wonder whether it really is a forever necessity. Is the Church forever built on Christ crucified? Is the Church of *necessity* built on Christ crucified?... Or might it one day be built on a new foundation having in mind the things of man. Peter's not alone in his heretical thoughts, for we sinners all have them. We might not so directly condemn the idea of Jesus dying for us – we actually think we love to hear that gospel; but we do *indirectly* condemn such a sacrifice: whenever we believe we need not repent, we confess that Christ overreacted by dying for sins. Whenever we believe our good intentions and good works ought 'count for something' and be noticed by God Most High, we confess that Christ overreacted by dying for sins. Whenever we believe that we need not focus our preaching on the cross, but may focus it on social relevance, personal happiness and worldly success, we confess that Christ overreacted by dying for sins.

How easily do we forget what it means that Christ builds His Church on the foundation of the incarnate God-Man laying down his life to deal *with sin*! We forget because we think that "Christ building His Church" means Christ building a worldly institution, and as long as that institution remains standing and I can be nominally associated with it, who cares what it believes, teaches and confesses... as if a denominational name gives eternal life as validly as faith's conviction of Christ's forgiveness of sins. Or perhaps we forget what it means that Christ builds His Church because we think

that “Christ building His Church” means Christ building *the church service*... as if, as long as we show up and go through the motions just right and have good attendance at the church service, who cares what it believes, teaches, and confesses for daily life and faith and love grounded upon *the forgiveness of sins*.

In truth, “Christ building His Church” means Christ building you and all the faithful... building and grounding your lives on the foundation of that justification once earned in history now individually applied to you in the forgiveness of sins, that you may live in faith of standing before the Almighty God as one counted as just, and – as one with God – you may live in delight of his will and therefore in fervent love toward your neighbor.

Christ building His Church on the foundation of Himself, the incarnate God once sacrificed upon the cross that the benefits may go out into your life’s story means that your life’s story is completely dependent upon and defined by the application of that cross – the forgiveness of sins – and how the clear conscience of forgiveness frees you to live life’s days in faith. And, if this is the foundation of the Church – the foundation of all souls whose confidence in Jesus – then we ought deny ourselves (if you will, starve all carnal pleasures, all hope in worldly princes, all comfort in worldly treasures) and take up the reality of living as a foreigner to this world and follow Christ through it and out of it and into the life of the world to come.

For, the one who seeks to save his life, to hold on to this world, to cling to this 'dimension'... that one has no use for the forgiveness of sins. What good is the other-worldly gifts of God for a this-worldly tunnel vision? The gifts of God clang irrelevant, seem useless to getting ahead in this life, and taste bland to our worldly pallet.

But, if we remain focused on what it means that Christ builds His Church – not an institution, but you and me – on the *other-worldly* God taking on *this-worldly* flesh and blood and earning for us and bestowing upon us the forgiveness of sins and a proper standing before the Holy God that we might have everlasting life... if we remain focused on that, we realize and confess that such everlasting benefits resulting in unending joy cannot be gained by trying to safeguard this life with worldly measures and pleasures.

Indeed, what shall man give in return for his life? In other words, what can balance in the scales as payment for and to safeguarding of the everlasting? Certainly nothing temporal. [This week, multiple churches in California were fined up to \$10,000 each for singing and/or meeting indoors. Will such fines deter them – would they deter us? – from the divine riches of the liturgy? May it not be so!]

You could give up your house, your savings, your wealth, your worldly freedoms, your constitutional rights, your neighborhoods... you could say, "I will give this all up if only I can

have assurances of life” (in fact, isn’t that what our society is actually toying with right now, the idea that “the promise of worldly safety is worth total lockdowns that take away my job, my ability to pay the mortgage, my freedoms and rights, peaceful and safe neighborhoods... but at least I’m safe from a virus” OR “Let’s vote to try atheism – atheistic Marxist socialism – to at least quiet mob rioters”... isn’t that what we’re toying with right now?)... and one could argue that that’s all worth giving up, and it would still never give you your life, for it could never give you these words: “Your sins are forgiven you.” Thus, bear your crosses, with eyes fixed on Jesus, because *there – in Him – is your forgiveness.*

Husbands and wives, what good is it to win the arguments of the marriage and get your own individual way if you thereby tear apart the body of marriage from Christ her head or threaten your spouse’s faith in the One whose marriage to and forgiveness of His Church is the foundation of your own marriage of mutual forgiveness grounded on Christ’s love? Children, what good is it to fight with or hold grudges against your brothers or sisters if it leads them to question the power of the forgiveness of sins on which Christ promised them they could build their daily lives in eager hope for everlasting life? Widows and widowers, what good would it be to cling to your home, all its past memories, all its current safety and germ-free air if it prevented you from the Word and Sacraments that feed you the forgiveness of sins and carry you toward the eternal

home prepared for you where you will meet your loved ones who have, in faith, gone on ahead of you?

Indeed, what good is safety from a virus, or what benefit is the greatest standing of anyone in all society if we cannot stand before God on that day when Christ comes again in his glory? What good is safety in our homes and neighborhoods if we give up the sheltering advocacy of Christ before the judgment seat of God? Ought we not risk it all, if you will, give it all up, if necessary... or at least not live our lives defined by hope for all things worldly... ought we not lay it all aside in anticipation of the everlasting day?

“For,” Jesus says in our text, “the Son of Man *is going to come* with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.”

Now, though this sentence might remind you of the end of the Athanasian Creed, this final phrase might not sound very Lutheran in your ears... (and brings us the same discomfort as when we get to the end of that Athanasian Creed once a year): “What do you mean, he will repay us according to what each has done? What happened to ‘salvation by grace alone’?” But, recall that the context is the Church being built on the forgiveness of sins. When the justifying work of Christ crucified is applied to us and, by the power of the forgiveness of sins, all our iniquities are removed from us, and that judgment of justification has already happened in Christ (meaning, we’re already safe!), what is left to be seen on that last

day but any good work we have done without trusting it as a good work, but trusting only Jesus. In Matthew 25, Jesus separates the sheep from the goats – those who rejoice in forgiveness from those who rejected forgiveness and their need for it – He separates them and says to the forgiven, “Come, inherit the kingdom... I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, thirsty and you gave me something to drink (and so on).” And they respond, “When? When did we do these things?” Such is the Christian life. “When did we do good works; we were simply trying to bear our cross?” ... Good works done largely without our knowledge because, right now, we only see and mourn over our sin. And yet, as he so freely and richly bestows justification and forgiveness upon us, all that remains is anything lived out in faith, even the simplest task of bearing our cross and duty toward neighbor in which – though it had been done with grumbling – such sin is now forgiven and all that is seen is that that task of our cross had been borne faithfully.

How powerful is the forgiveness of sins won upon and flowing from the cross of Christ, that by it Jesus makes us appear worthy of eternal life, that He might – by grace and through the forgiveness of sins – “repay us” according to what the forgiveness of sins has made clean. So then, on that final day, Jesus will come with all his angels, and he will judge – *not* our justification, for that has already been judged at the cross (yes, how necessary that Christ suffer and die and after three days rise and build His Church on this

salvation by grace alone) – but, on that foundation, on the last day he will judge the power of his own forgiveness and the fruits of faith once hidden that he now brings into plain sight.

So powerful is this merciful judge and forgiving Christ that He even has authority to claim at the end of our text, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” Now, what does that mean and how does it convey Christ’s power and authority to rule and safeguard His Church?

Theologians disagree on how to interpret this – “Of which disciples did Jesus speak? What does it mean that they won’t taste death *until* He comes in his kingdom? When is that kingdom coming? – is that the last day, His own resurrection, the weekly coming in Word and Sacrament?” The debates abound.

Perhaps we cannot know the cryptic statement he was giving to his immediate audience. But we *can* hang our hat on his appeal to his divine knowledge and authority over their life and death. *He* is the incarnate God on whom the whole hope of the Church is built. Why in the world would you try and wrestle that authority away from him and claim that you should clamor about to keep or save your own earthly life rather than be willing to lose it when Christ has appointed you to see the kingdom of heaven?

Thus, in faith of the saving work of his cross, we ought take up our crosses and follow him, never rebuking his holy will, nor being

a hindrance to the Gospel, nor idolizing and seeking to profit the whole world... but, if need be, forsaking it all, eagerly anticipating that day when Christ will come with his angels in the glory of the Father, and – in that glory – will raise us up from the taste of death and give to us the full inheritance even now assured us in the forgiveness of sins, those keys to heaven won by the incarnate and crucified Christ on whom the Church is firmly built.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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