

Matthew 16:13-20 - "The Way of the Cross"

Pr. Kurt A. VanFossan - Proper 17A (Pentecost 14) 2023

Our Gospel reading from Matthew immediately follows the Gospel reading last week where we heard Peter's great confession of faith. After Jesus asked His disciples, "*'Who do you say I am?' Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'*" Jesus, then, went on to point out that Peter's faith was a blessing which did not come from any natural born wisdom in Peter, but from Jesus' Father in heaven. But at the end of last week's Gospel reading Jesus "*strictly charged/instructed His disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ.*" The reason Jesus said this becomes obvious in our Gospel reading for today.

While Peter and the other apostles believed that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Savior, they were certainly not clear on how Jesus would fulfill His role as Christ, and for whom. So, Jesus didn't want His disciples misinforming others about **how** He would save us, and **who** He had come to save.

Therefore, from that time onward 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.*" Why **must** all this take place in Jerusalem? Because this is the place where God chose to make the ultimate sacrifice for all mankind. God made this clear way back in the days of Abraham when He tested Abraham's faith by telling him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, on a mountain in the land of Moriah (Genesis 22). That place would be the future site of Jerusalem and the temple.

If you remember, God stopped Abraham from sacrificing his only son, Isaac, on that mountain (the future Jerusalem). In place of Isaac, God provided a ram (a male sheep), "*caught in a thicket by his horns.*" That ram pointed ahead to the only Son of God, Jesus Christ. And the thicket reminds us of the crown of thorns which would be on Jesus' head when He was crucified in Jerusalem.

Peter and the other disciples were unable to make these connections at the time of our text. Instead, they were still caught up in thinking about their future in this world once Jesus defeated their enemies, like the Romans. Therefore, when Jesus started talking about being "*killed,*" He was deflating their worldly plans. That's why Peter was quick to, in his mind, not only come to the defense of Jesus, but also to defend his (and most likely the other disciple's) plans for great things in this world. Peter took Jesus aside "*and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.'*"

That's when Jesus turned and said to Peter, "*Get behind me, Satan.*" The word "satan" means adversary; someone who gets in our way, or tries to lead us astray. Without realizing it, Peter was speaking like Satan in the wilderness when Satan told Jesus to avoid suffering and death by turning a rock into bread.

So, instead of Peter being a rock on which the church is built when he confessed his faith that Jesus is the Christ, he was now a rock that would cause people to stumble because he was confessing a faith in Peter's way of salvation instead of God's way. Peter was rejecting not only **how** Jesus would save us, but he was also rejecting **who** Jesus had come to save. Jesus came to save not only the Jews but also the Gentiles, like the Romans.

Let's now apply this to ourselves. The moment God give us faith in the Good News that Jesus died on the cross to pay the full price for the sins of all people, thus opening the door of heaven to all people, this is the moment our lives are

turned from selfishly focusing on ourselves to focusing on others. Once we're given faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior, we are also given the desire to save others.

This is what Jesus was focusing on in the second half of our text, when He said, *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* Why did Jesus deny Himself and take up His cross? Not for Himself, but for us. And our God given faith in Jesus Christ enables us to do the same for others, to be willing to suffer for the sake of others, because we know that we have all that we need in Christ; our eternal future is secure in Him.

But we shouldn't start to think that we can carry the crosses God gives us on our own. Since our sinful nature doesn't believe in Christ and His promises, it will continue to try to convince us during good times and bad that we don't have all we need, that we never have enough. Our sinful nature wants a life free from suffering now, so it rejects any notion of bearing a cross—of being willing to suffer in this life for the sake of others. That's why our sinful nature keeps turning us inward toward ourselves instead of outward toward God and others.

Thank God for the crosses He gives us, for they are meant to do the exact opposite. Instead of turning us inward to ourselves for salvation, the crosses God sends us help us recognize our weakness and the eventual end of our life in this world, thus turning us first to God—to find our strength and life in Christ alone.

In His strength the Lord always calls us to say no to our self-centered, sinful nature—to drown it daily and trust in God's promise of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. And someday the Lord may lay a cross on us that will require us to give up everything in this world, even life itself, instead of giving up our faith and willingness to share our faith with others (like many Christians are doing today in other parts of the world). But for now most of us simply struggle with the sinner in us when it comes to knowing how much of our God given time, talents and treasures to give to the church and how much to keep for ourselves.

I'm not called by God decide how much you should give, but to tell you how much God gave to assure us of our eternal life in paradise with Him. Our salvation doesn't depend on our gifts to others, but on God's gifts to us in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!

If your faith in Christ has inspired you to be willing to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him, as I know it has in so many of you here today, then we can be thankful for the wonderful opportunities God gives us through the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Rocky Mountain District, and this congregation, it's preschool and school, to live generously—to pour whatever amount of our time, talent and treasures we choose into these organizations and to know that we are helping to support the proclamation of God's saving Word of Truth among people throughout the world, Colorado and our local community. What a joy it is to share part of the eternal inheritance God gives us for the good of others!

All glory be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Children's Sermon] Place sins, like selfish, complaining, bragging, on an image of us—sins which cause us to be stuck in the mud. Place words like sharing, thankful, humble, on an image of Jesus. Then turn both images around to show that all our sins were placed on Jesus, causing Him to be stuck in the mud of hell, so that through His resurrection He could set us free and make us thankful, humble, sharing people like Jesus. Through our baptism and faith in Jesus, He sets us free from being stuck in the mud, so that we can fly around this world telling others the Good News about Jesus.