

Matthew 16:21-16

Pentecost 14

Look to the Cross of Christ!

***“24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”***

My brothers and my sisters in Christ Jesus. As we continue our examination of the Church. We ride into our text following one of the most confident and famous assertions of Christ in the Bible. We studied it last week: the exclusivity of Christ for salvation, where we heard Peter standing and proclaiming boldly to Jesus after he asks him ‘Who do you say I am,’ to which he replies: ***“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”***

It’s after this that there is a turning point in the life of Christ, as well as a turning point for Peter. Just a few verses prior, Jesus had praised him, stating that his confession was the rock on which the church would be built, but now, what does Jesus say? ***“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”*** Ouch, Peter. Jesus specifically takes him by himself, turns to him like a disobedient child, and sternly rebukes him in a way that none of us would ever want to be, let alone by Jesus Christ himself: “Get behind me, Satan.”

What happened? What changed? Well, Jesus rebuke is in response to Peter making a bold statement again. At this point in the Gospel, Jesus starts to focus his disciples on what the mission of the Messiah entails. He has established clearly his being as the Messiah, and now he will continue to try to get his disciples to understand the mission of the Messiah.

Jesus explains it very clearly: ***“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”*** Jesus explains to his faithful disciples that he, the Messiah, must go suffer, die, and rise again. That’s his goal.

And Peter is not happy about this. ***“Never, Lord!” He said, “This shall never happen to you!”*** This seems so innocent, doesn’t it? It seems like a good student, a

dear friend, wanting his friend, someone he cares about, to avoid suffering. It seems like a student not wanting his teacher to deal with overwhelming shame. It seems like a pious person being willing to stick up for his God in the face of adversity. What about that could ever be equated with sin and even so far as Satan?

Peter, whatever his understanding of Christ and his mission is at this point, has let human concerns become more important than the concerns of God. His concerns were not that of the divine mission of Christ. If he was hoping that the Messiah would be an earthly king who would exalt him from a lowly wanderer to a noble nature, he had placed his desire for power above the mission of God. If he thought that Jesus was going to make his life easy and breezy, he had placed his human concern for comfort over the mission of Christ. If he was worried that the death of the teacher would mean the death of the follower, he had placed the human concern of safety over the mission of the Messiah. And while these things may seem innocent, they got in the way of the plan of salvation and the will of God. Earthly concerns over heavenly. And if it is not in line with the will of God, it is contrary to it.

There are too many examples of creatively sinful people like you and me of human concerns that we let get in the way of Jesus, whether material, logical, social, or even psychological. What Jesus says is clear: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." The idea of carrying your cross has crossed over into colloquial English and taking your hardships as they come and continuing on. But this is a little more intense to the people he is speaking to. The cross is the execution of the criminal. It is a point of sneering and, ultimately, a pain-filled death. Jesus is saying that following him involves a death, either literal or metaphorical. Following Jesus means killing all that stands in the way of him and his cross. Put to death your desire for power and wealth over him. Put to death the idea of comfort and happiness over him. Put to death my desire for friendship over him. Take up your cross.

And why? What good will it be to willingly give up the things that Christ calls me to give up? Why follow Christ to the cross if it involves suffering in the mind, or sneering by peers, or even physical pain, or an untimely death? Why? Why take up that cross to follow Christ? Jesus puts it so simply: ***"What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"***

It's infinitely far more important to look at the cross of Christ than at our own crosses. All those things, those human things, are so minuscule in comparison to what it was that Christ came to do. The Messiah, whose hands held the universe, humbled himself to take on a human body and walk among sinful mankind. The Messiah, who had no hint or desire for sin, took all sin on himself. The perfect Son of God subjected himself to scorn and humiliation by people who misinterpreted the very word he inspired. The

eternal took a final breath and died. Why would Jesus take that cross? Why would Christ bear that load? It's for the salvation of your souls.

And Jesus would not let anyone or anything get in the way of his cross that he must bear. He would not let the comfort of his human body get in the way of his goal of salvation. He would not let Peter's human ideas get in the way of his cross. He would not let Satan get in the way of his cross because it was on that cross that his wish was completed. It is on that cross of suffering that he, and he alone, could take the sins away from his children so their souls would be pure. It was on that cross that the burden of the law could be lifted from our shoulders. It was on that cross and all that it entailed that he would guarantee an eternity with all of those who believed in him.

It is in the cross of Christ, his works, his suffering, his shame, his death, not mine, that gives me life everlasting. And there is nothing in this world that could ever be worth more than that. There is nothing that can be cherished and held more dear than that cross.

As Lutherans, the cross of Christ is something that we are constantly focused on because it's what Christ was focused on. And the new man, the one that has been cleansed by that cross with vigor and joy, puts to death anything that takes away or obscures the cross of Christ and what Jesus did for me. We take it all and daily put it to death. We take our sinful desires and put them to death, and we look to the cross of Christ, where we are assured that we stand forgiven. We take my works and my pride, and we throw them away, and I look to the Cross of Christ where true salvation has been achieved. I take my earthly wealth and my desire for control, and they burn away as I look to the cross of Christ, my true treasure and power. I take my comfort and let it pass away as I look to the cross and have my true solace.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, joyously take up your cross, whatever it may be. But take that cross, always looking to the cross of Christ. It was on that cross that the Messiah won for you salvation. It was on that cross that your sins were forgiven, your souls were cleansed, and your eternal life was secured. Look to that cross, Amen.