

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 13, 2020

Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church

Farmington, New Mexico

Matthew 16:21-26 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. **22** And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! [e] This shall never happen to you." **23** But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. **25** For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. **26** For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

"Christ's Cross Redefines the Christian Life"

It's the first time you've seen each other since you graduated from high school. So much can happen in a short amount of time. Some people know exactly what they want to be all their life. Five year olds shouting with conviction to anyone who will listen that they will be a firefighter when they grow up. But you weren't so sure. You just knew you wanted to do something. Make a better life. You chose to go off to college. Jesse went into the military. So he reports back about basic training, uniforms, drill, chow, barracks. Then being sent half way across the country far from home. Then being sent overseas. There's actually a lot in common with you going away to college. Living in a tiny apartment. Living off Ramen noodles. Driving a vehicle you're never quite sure will make it to campus and back. Both of you are making sacrifices. Giving up comfort and familiarity. And sometimes you wonder why. Why did you choose this path? Is all the struggle even worth it?

Enlisting in the military. Heading off to college. Putting yourself through diesel mechanic school. They all require sacrifices. Maybe you start on that path with a clear vision for the future. Maybe it's pretty hazy. But you know what kind of life you want. A different life. A better life. It's a challenge. But you keep telling yourself it will all be worth it.

Today Jesus challenges disciples. He holds out his cross. Everyone who would following after him should calculate the costs. Weigh out what is required. And then consider the blessings Jesus has in store for you on the other end. He invites his followers to embrace his cross. Let it redefine your entire life. Christ's cross redefines the Christian's life.

Jesus knows exactly what life has in store for him. He is zeroing in on reaching his ultimate goal. Now is the time to help clarify his life's mission for his disciples: **"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) Four main things Jesus wants his disciples to know are absolutely essential for him to finish his work: 1) head to Jerusalem, 2) suffer at the hands of the

religious authorities, 3) be killed, and 4) be raised back to life. It's not certain how much of that the disciples comprehended. Maybe they didn't even listen to the end after hearing about suffering and death.

See, Jesus has a clear understanding that the cross was essential for his life, because it was necessary to give life to all his followers. The disciples on the other hand, had a different idea of what Jesus should do with his life. And the root of that misunderstanding stemmed from a flawed idea of the kind of life a Christian can expect. Peter was so convinced he was right and Jesus' prediction was out of whack that he privately scolded Jesus: **"Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."** (Matthew 16:22 ESV)

The easiest way to explain Peter's actions is that Peter had an entourage attachment to Jesus. A few years ago HBO aired a show called Entourage. The main character was a handsome, charming actor. While in Hollywood he surrounded himself with three buddies from back in New York. The practical friend became a trusted practical advisor. The fun one drove him around and arranged parties. His half brother tried to sneak into the spotlight to get himself some acting roles. Or at least girls. You've seen an entourage around athletes, musicians, even politicians. Add maybe it's harsh to think of them as parasites. Because they probably feel like they are providing important services to an important person and hoping to benefit in some small way from their friend's power, wealth, and influence.

Christians claim the cross of Jesus, but treat Jesus with this entourage mentality. Jesus might have difficult, painful, challenging work to do. And as long as we stay somewhere within his orbit, we should be able to gain some kind of benefit from our association with Jesus.

And so Jesus challenges us. Just like he turned to Peter and smacked down devilish desires, Jesus has a sharp rebuke for you and me today. For all of us, "the cross is the sign of challenge." (Senkbeil, p. 47)

Here's what I mean. So often we can't shake off our own earthbound expectations for our own lives. We want Jesus to fit into our expectations. Molding and shaping his mission to match what we feel would make my life better, easier, happier. If I could better provide financially for my loved ones. If I could find an escape from responsibilities and restrictions. If I could have the best body and healthiest lifestyle that would make me virtually invincible to dangerous viruses. If people could see me as sexually desirable so I could love myself and feel attractive. If I could hear acceptance from my friends and classmates so I could feel validated. If I could find security in my heritage and know my ancestors approval of how I have cherished everything they have passed down to me then I would feel honorable to their way of life. If I could improve my behavior to be more consistent, then I could legitimately feel superior to all the lawlessness and disrespect for authority I see all around today.

That's why Jesus summarizes the challenge of the cross for disciples: **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."** (Matthew 16:24 ESV) Self-denial is the key. Purely human concerns so often dominate our minds. So

self-denial requires me to give up my image of what God is supposed to be for me. So let's define self-denial according to the standards of Jesus. It's not refusing chocolate cake when you feel a craving. It's not giving up soda when you find yourself depending on that caffeine. It's not putting off marriage when you think you would really benefit from a Christian companion. Jesus defined self-denial is a challenge. Challenging your most basic assumptions about how to bring happiness to your heart. Challenging your vision for a good life for your self and your loved ones. Challenging you to say no to your default impulses to embrace Jesus' better and more blessed version of life for you.

A while back my ears perked up when a song came on the radio. "I had a dream / I got everything I wanted," it started out. Now when I realized the singer was Billie Eilish, a teenage pop star who has won countless awards and whose songs have been played millions of times, that dream doesn't seem far-fetched. But the spoiler alert to the song play out just like every episode of Behind the Music on VH1. Getting everything you want doesn't make you have or make you feel like life is fulfilling. It usually leads to personal despair and ruin.

There is a reason why Jesus has such a sharp rebuke for Peter. He says: **"Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."** (Matthew 16:23) Jesus puts Peter's scolding on the same level as the devil's series of temptations back at the beginning of his ministry. Peter's efforts could derail the real work Jesus came to accomplish. A Jesus without a cross robs disciples of real life. Our desires for entourage benefits from Jesus without his cross are downright satanic. Giving up Jesus' own understanding of his mission means missing out on better blessings He has in store for us. We could get everything we expect out of life. Jesus could deliver every blessing we are after. All the advantages of a privileged place next to Jesus could pile up. But Jesus without his cross would leave us to grapple with the damning effects of our own sin. Without the blood of his sacrifice, we could have everything but lose our souls. Without his cross to cleanse and restore, we would be eternally condemned before our God.

Thankfully, Jesus isn't some self-important monarch or full-of-himself celebrity. Jesus didn't avoid the harsh reality of the cross. Jesus didn't avoid going up to Jerusalem because of its danger. He was determined to do what was necessary for him. Jesus didn't shy away from the hostile religious council. He knew he had to confront them and be sentenced by them. Jesus never used his divine status as a privilege to bypass suffering and fast forward to glory. Jesus didn't avoid the conspiratorial trap set for him. He knew suffering and death would actually backfire against his enemies and accomplish God's plans of salvation. Jesus knew the necessity of that suffering to absorb the punishment for your sin and mine. Jesus knew the path for his life led to death.

Because Jesus embraced his cross, your life is redefined by his life for you.

A few days ago I was talking with someone who has been sober for a few years now. He described how challenging it was to admit his problem and start attending AA meetings. But when he stuck with it, it was worth it. He had some setbacks. But over time, he came to

realize he never wanted to go back to the way his life was when he needed to drink, when his desire for alcohol controlled his entire being.

Jesus is so much better than a genie in your pocket. Instead of thinking of what Jesus could give me to make my life easier, better, happier, I look to the cross to find a better definition of the Christian life. The cross of Jesus make the things I want from Jesus to make life better actually undesirable by comparison. Christ's cross means forgiveness instead of indulging in my desires. Peace instead of restless chasing after earthly satisfaction. Reconciliation with God instead of the hamster wheel of trying to find approval from others. Rest in the perfection of Jesus instead of perpetually pretending my faults aren't as bad as everyone else's.

Confrontations are unfortunate. But they can also bring tremendous growth. Jesus as Jesus confronted Peter's faulty understanding of discipleship, Jesus comes to you today to help address key deficiencies in your faith. Jesus wants you to embrace a greater understanding of blessings he brings by a life redefined by his cross. The cross shows us Jesus made the hard choices. Embracing his cross as a disciple is a no-brainer. Jesus doesn't limit your freedom. Jesus makes everyone other choice inconceivable. He shows that nothing in the world, everything else in the world, won't really satisfy. Nothing would be worth giving up Jesus and his cross.

Jesus says all the sacrifices are worth it. His cross is his mark of ownership on you. Even when you struggle, the cross reminds you that Jesus paid the ultimate price for you to be his own. When you are suffering, you have a Savior who knows pain and absorbed the worst abuse humanity had to offer. And instead of giving you a genie's lamp so you give you everything you could want, Jesus promises to go with you into every joy and every challenge. So the cross is the only choice for life. And it's really no choice at all. Life with Jesus has all the riches of his holiness that could never be purchased by all the world's wealth. Amen.

+ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. +