

Pastor's Message – 9/3/23
Matthew 16:21-28

I've done some unconventional, non-conforming things in planning the worship service for today and they are really inspired by the gospel passage from Matthew. There is so much to chew on in just 9 verses; ideas that don't necessarily follow each other. This passage has 5 distinct sections in just a few verses which is why I divided the reading the way I did.

First, Jesus reveals to his disciples that he's going to be murdered in Jerusalem.

Second, Peter rashly rebukes the same person who, in the previous verses in chapter 16 of Matthew, that is, specifically in verse 16, he has just identified as the "Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Third, Jesus rebukes Peter, calling him a stumbling block, a *skandalon* in the Greek, or in the New Living Translation, "a dangerous trap." (16.23)

Fourth, he gives us his "deny-and-take-up-your-cross" speech. (16.24-27)

Finally, to emphasize the future reward for believers, he says that the "Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will judge people according to their deeds" (16:27).

The passage we read today has many catchphrases that are familiar and we use in everyday conversation ("Get behind me Satan," "Forget yourself and carry your cross," "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it"). Peter has gone from being a rock to being a stumbling block in one week. Jesus asks us very clearly to forget about ourselves and the natural desire to "save" and "improve" our lives. Instead, God asks us to choose God's goals in life, to potentially "lose" our life and in the process discover what really matters.

We seem to live in a country called "Me." We have Me rules, Me goals, Me dreams, Me plans, Me money, Me toys and Me gadgets. When people -- and the *behavior* of people -- disrupt life in "Me," "me" gets very upset. Because it is all about "me." It is not about you. It is not about your needs, your feelings, your dreams and goals. It is about me.

That struck me in the recent Verizon commercials. Take a look at this.

Jesus turns the "My Plan" upside down.

If we want to be disciples, we must change countries. We must live in the country of "You." You come first. Your needs are paramount. We live to make certain that You are cared for, that You are honored and respected and that You are whole and healthy in every way.

"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me," Jesus says. People say things like, "This illness, this death, or whatever the situation is, is my cross to bear." But being the victim of crime isn't a cross to bear. Illness isn't a cross to bear. The cross Jesus asks us to bear involves voluntarily self-sacrifice for the benefit of another person. Jesus picked up his cross voluntarily for the sake of the world, including you and me.

Being ill isn't a cross – perhaps all you need is better medicine or surgery or ... - but choosing to care for an ill, elderly parent could well be a cross that you pick up and bear. The cross is not the illness or chronic physical problem you may have, as difficult as it may be to endure the suffering it causes. Cross-bearing is a *voluntary* act of discipleship, not the bearing of something that befalls us in the daily course of things or befalls us in situations over which we have no control or befalls us because of situations we have foolishly brought on ourselves.

Cross-bearing always involves the "picking up" part, or the "taking up" part. The cross is something we choose. We can pass the cross and leave it behind -- and leave Jesus behind as well. Or we can stop, pick up the cross and follow Jesus.

It comes down to intent. It comes down to purpose. Life is not all about me. For what purpose do I live – do we as a church live? Does that purpose extend or benefit anyone outside our walls?

We can't follow Jesus without the cross.

That's like being a Cubs fan but not being willing to wear a Cubs T-shirt in public or being a Packers fan and not being willing to put on one of those ridiculous cheese-heads.

No, we can't follow Jesus without the cross. Jesus knows it, and soon, those who would follow Jesus understand it as well, and they fade away, sliding into the background and darkness. Gone.

It is a rough thing to have to endure suffering. Sometimes it just seems to appear in our lives out of nowhere. An accident, an illness,

the death of someone close to us can threaten to throw us into grief and depression that can even incapacitate us. In such cases, how we suffer says volumes about our faith and our understanding of God.

But Jesus takes this one step more. He tells his followers not only to suffer faithfully but to choose suffering when it serves God's purposes. Suddenly tithing, use of time, choices we make when shopping, the work we do -- literally everything -- are included in the work of discipleship. If the way of the cross is the way we live our lives, then there is nothing we encounter that is not an opportunity to live our faith.

With the inherent and counter-cultural challenges in Christianity, one wonders how it ever got started in the first place. "The simple phrase, 'For God so loved the world,' would have puzzled an educated pagan," Sociologist Rodney Stark says. "The notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd." But we can read Jesus saying in the gospel of John, "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him" (3.16-17).

I scheduled that video today, the song, "I'll Be Watching You," by The Police to underscore Jesus' love for us. It might be frightening or unsettling to think that we are always being watched, but the song's lyrics, if sung in Jesus' voice, remind us that "we belong to him," and Jesus longs to have us close to him and grieves the steps that move us away.

Jesus longs to give us all that he has to offer, the best that life can offer, and all the amazing grace that is available as part of his love for us. He longs to create and recreate this world into the heaven that has begun and is still yet to come. He took up the cross that believers might have life and life everlasting in this world and the world to come.

For Christians, the cross is a sign of identity and belonging and a mark of our faith. At the same time, many struggle with the thought that Jesus' violent death and the cross of torture are at the heart of faith. As people called into community by Christ, we need to reclaim the image of the cross and the voluntary sacrifice that is part of it, rather than ignore it. We recognize that part of community life is

conflict and part is healing, and we celebrate that we are not asked to endure suffering alone, nor to wait for full and abundant life only in the hereafter. We are called into community so that together, we may shoulder the cross and journey together in partnership with Christ and with one another.

Blessings and amazing grace are both here now and a reward in the end when Christ returns. That's why I separated out verse 28. This is really good to know. Sure, we're not told what the vindication will be for those who die to self through faith in Christ but there *will* be vindication. Will it be some kind of parade around the pearly gates? Will it be a monetary prize? If so, what currency will be used in the new creation? Euros? Dollars? Bitcoins? The lack of detail would be bothersome if Jesus hadn't proven himself so trustworthy through his resurrection. So, while we don't know just what this "reward" will look like we can be absolutely certain that there will be one. Good to know, especially on the days that the road of discipleship is, as predicted by Jesus, decidedly dark.

Jesus' call is not what the world considers normal. It is counter-cultural and tips the values of the world upside-down. The ideas of faith are at least challenging:

- the idea of a God who *chooses* suffering in order to save is strange;
- the idea of discipleship as discovering God at the *end of me* rather than the *best* of me is new;
- the idea that our ultimate reward is guaranteed now but not delivered until *then* is foreign.

Do we believe enough in the promises of Jesus that we can sing with integrity, "Where He Leads Me, I Will Follow?" Can we sing along with Whoopi Goldberg and the Choir of Sister Act, "I will follow Him, follow Him wherever He goes?" Do we believe enough in Jesus' love for us to let Him watch and see and govern every aspect of our lives?" Have we truly "decided to follow Jesus?"

That following of Jesus will look different for every believer, but it always involves thinking of others first. Success looks different for Christians, but it always involves a guarantee in the end, of being with God forever. "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be. When we all see Jesus, we'll sing and shout the victory!"