

September 3, 2017

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 17)

“The Gift of a Cross to Bear”

Matthew 16:21-28

What was Peter’s big foul here?

*“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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’ 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.’”*

This is arguably the most powerful rebuke Jesus ever nails anybody with. Why is Peter’s understandable reaction to the idea that the man Peter just correctly identified as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” should go to Jerusalem and be killed met with a reproach likening Peter to Satan? Well, probably because Peter is behaving like Satan.

Back in chapter four of Matthew Jesus was tempted by Satan and one of those temptations was that Jesus would be a ruler of all the world...if Jesus would only bow down and worship Satan. Jesus rebuked Satan then and he rebukes Peter now because Peter has the same thing in mind—that Jesus go to Jerusalem as the new king of Israel, not as a sacrifice for sin.

The difference is that Satan of course meant it for evil. Peter wasn’t seeking evil, he just couldn’t get his mind around the plan of God. He, and pretty much every other Jew in Israel, could not in any way, shape or form equate Yahweh’s long promised Messiah with suffering and death.

We, thanks to this Gospel and the rest of God’s New Testament handed down to us through God’s church, understand what Jesus was talking about. We know that yeah, it was necessary that the Messiah be the perfect sacrifice, suffering and dying under the penalty of the world’s sin, our sin, so sin’s penalty would be paid and we would be saved. It was necessary Jesus rise to new and perfect life in victory, the firstfruits of the resurrection of all believers to paradise forever. We don’t reject this truth like Peter. We embrace it as disciples, as followers of Christ...at least to a point.

We tend to run into some trouble when Jesus says, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*

Nobody wants to bear a cross. The cross is shameful and lowly, not a place of stature or respect. The cross is an object of anguish and misery, not comfort and wellbeing. The cross is death to this earthly life. The cross is nothing we would seek to bear, rather something we flee from.

Yet this is the job description that Jesus gives to those who are His disciples. As followers of Jesus we simply are to get over ourselves and follow Him in the humble, serving, loving way that He walked. Yet we can be a lot like Peter. Peter couldn’t handle that Yahweh’s Messiah equated with suffering and death. We have a real hard time accepting that our life baptized into this same Messiah equates to our humility, sacrifice, and in some cases yes, suffering and death. Deep inside each one of us that self-loving sinful voice screams, “Far be it from me Lord! This shall never happen to me!”

Now the good thing for us is we live in these United States. Many of these disciples Jesus spoke to would indeed face physical suffering and death for the faith. Christians elsewhere in the world are facing persecution and martyrdom this very day. You and I may gather and worship freely and in peace. Our cross is pretty light. You’d think that being baptized into Jesus and having the certainty of forgiveness, salvation and eternal life as a gift from God we’d eagerly bear that light

cross. You'd think. But that voice doesn't let up, "Far be it from me Lord! This shall never happen to me!"

Part of bearing our cross, that job description of a disciple, is outlined in our epistle reading from Romans today.

*"Let love be genuine."* Are you bearing that cross? Well, yeah, to those you love and who love you back. But Jesus example of genuine love that led Him to the cross wasn't just for those.

*"Let love be genuine."* Do you have love for those ignorant folks of the other political bent? How about for illegal aliens? The poor? Those of a different skin color than yours? For Antifa, white supremacists, snowflake college kids. Forget the abstract examples, do you have genuine love for that neighbor or co-worker or boss or classmate or family member who is right there next to you but is, shall we say, irritating...oh fine, they're a real jerk.

Do you bear the cross of attempting to love them and not bear them malice, or have you said "Fine, they're a jerk. The hell with them. I'm justified in my disdain. So be it."? Is that bearing the cross or willingly dropping it?

*"Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good."* Anybody got a favorite TV show or website that is just loaded with raunchy filth and leads one's mind without question into sexual immorality? Are you abhorring it...or looking forward to the next episode. Turning of the TV---Ooooooh, such a cross to bear. Are you willing?

*"Bless those who persecute you...be patient...do not be haughty...repay no one evil for evil..."* Just read over what St. Paul writes...we'd all agree that's some good, godly stuff there, but are we seriously making the attempt to bear this cross of imitating Christ, or are we paying a lot of lip service and not so much action?

Now I know this talk has probably made a lot of folks here today feel lousy. Good. It should. I don't think any of us bears our cross so well, and if you think you do then I think your dropping it when it comes to the humility part.

But the good news is that your failure to bear your cross well does not exclude you from discipleship. No, by the power of the Holy Spirit you are a disciple and you know why you have this cross in the first place—because you so badly need the cross of Christ Jesus.

Jesus didn't die for those who can bear a cross perfectly. He bore His cross perfectly for us because we can't. This is why we are baptized into His death to sin on the cross—and into His resurrection to life beyond it! This is why we received His body and blood that was perfectly given up on the cross for the forgiveness of our failings to follow God rightly.

And this is why we don't despair when we see how horribly we've failed to deny ourselves and follow Christ. Yes, our failure is great as we see how we've so often not only dropped our cross but willingly thrown it down to chase the world. But our gracious God's Word is not just damning Law, it's the sweet Gospel that turns us from ourselves and toward our Lord Jesus Christ and we remember His grace and mercy in giving Himself for us. We repent, receive that grace and are forgiven. In that, the cross He calls us to bear is again on our shoulder, and we gladly seek to bear it to His glory.

Don't commit Peter's foul. God's Messiah did equate with suffering and death, and that was the best of all gifts because it obtained our peace with God and life everlasting. Our following Christ does equate with denying ourselves and dying to this world, and this is the greatest of gifts, because Christ is leading us through this world's suffering and death to paradise.

Amen.