

King of Glory Lutheran Church

August 29/30, 2020

Year A: 13th Weekend after Pentecost: Matthew 16:21-28

Rev. Debra Abbott

Matthew 16:21-28

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of 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, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

²⁷ “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

You know the type. At school, at work, in a meeting, in the grocery store. Wherever there are people there is always that one person you notice who seems to have it all together. They are confident. They don't care what other people think. They are sure that they know what's going on.

Sometimes these are people we look up to and admire. Sometimes they can be pretty annoying.

Maybe you have known that feeling for yourself. Confidence in your abilities and sure that whatever the questions is, you have an answer. Maybe you walked into 1st grade thinking that you owned the place. Or knew that you were going to be the best employee there ever was your first day at a new job.

In our gospel reading today, Peter, disciple of Jesus, is that guy. He thought he was hot stuff.

If you peek back a couple verses, you would see that Peter just answered Jesus' big question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Nice work Peter. You got it. Top disciple. Jesus gives you a new name. No longer Simon but Peter, Petra in Greek, the Rock. Jesus says he is building his church on you.

It all lasts for Peter for just 4 short verses in the gospel of Matthew.

Then Jesus is saying to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

It happens to all of us. We think we've got it all figured out. We have that moment where we are the best student, best leader, best friend, best disciple.

But Peter is human. He's like us. He has the right answer one minute and gets it wrong the next. He thinks he knows who Jesus is and what the future holds. But he doesn't. Not completely.

Sound familiar? Have you ever been sure you had the right answer, had God all figured out, been confident in your faith, your answers, your self only to suddenly find that God is not who you thought? That your faith is more questions than answers? That being a disciple means being vulnerable and humble? That following Jesus means service and sacrifice?

On this day Peter wasn't expecting death, he wasn't expecting the cross. He's shocked by Jesus' words that Jesus will be betrayed, suffer, die and be raised on the third day.

For Christians today the cross is a symbol. One that we often take for granted. It is a symbol of Jesus, of the Christian faith, of the church, of salvation, love, forgiveness, grace.

But for Peter, in this moment, the cross is suffering, terror and death. He cries out, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

Have you known a moment like Peter had today? A moment when you realized that the Christian life was not what you thought it would be?

Jesus lays it all out today. He is on his way to the cross. To face suffering and death.

After challenging the authorities of his time by preaching about unconditional love, forgiveness, grace, justice, equality, generosity and service Jesus will be put to death.

To follow Jesus and love unconditionally and completely is not safe, not glorious or glamorous, not easy.

Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

The cross means many things for you and for me. But imagine what it would have meant to the disciples on this day. Whatever the disciples thought following Jesus meant – a new social order, a new government, a new life – turned upside down by Jesus’ words. To follow Jesus they now hear means giving up power, greatness, control, popularity, security and could cost them their very life.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

So what if you were hearing these words for the first time? What if the cross did not signify hope in the resurrection or identify a Christian community for you yet? What would it mean for Jesus to tell you to take up your cross and follow him?

Karoline Lewis, professor at Luther Seminary writes, “Before the cross signified salvation, it was the instrument of condemnation. It was a sign for what happens when power is crossed and when you choose to embody in the world a different expression of power.”

The cross is a different expression of power. God’s power. The power of love. It challenges ruling powers in our world that value power in terms of armies or wealth, education or class, race or gender.

In our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans today we hear Paul explaining what it means to follow Jesus and where God's power lies.

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

It's a long list but one that says a lot about the Christian life. To claim the cross, to carry it and follow Jesus means to live out God's ways of love when it is hard to do so, unpopular, even dangerous.

Extend hospitality to strangers.
Bless those who persecute you.
Associate with the lowly.
Live peaceably with all.
Overcome evil with good.

Jesus calls us to follow him to love and care for people regardless of the cost. And Peter witnessed first hand what the cross meant for Jesus and all his disciples. He saw suffering and death. But he also saw life and love.

To follow Jesus, to take up the cross demands everything of us, our whole life. A life that we give to God and to others. And we can do this; follow Jesus, risk our lives by sharing God's great love and living out that love; because God first loved us.

Jesus invites us into this life promising that even when we know suffering and death, God's love will always win. Has already won.

So look to the cross today, see it with new eyes. Consider what life God is calling you to live, how God is calling you to serve, who God needs you to love. Take up your cross, follow Jesus. It won't be easy but you won't be alone. Jesus walks with you and this community all the way. Amen.