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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17A)

September 3, 2017

Text: Matthew 16:21–28

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Such was Peter’s great confession of faith heard just last week from Matthew 16:16. A blessed moment indeed! The true confession of faith in Jesus given to Peter by none other than God the Father Himself. Jesus then promised that the Church, which is built upon Christ, would prevail even over the Satanic forces of hell itself. Matthew 16:13–20 was a defining moment in the life of Christ’s Church, one that remains no less important today. For we are the Church built upon the rock, Christ Jesus.

But then Jesus does something unexpected. The very next verse (vs. 21), the beginning of today’s gospel reading, records that Jesus “began to show his disciples that he must suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” No sooner had Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ then Jesus says “And that Christ must die.” Try to appreciate the jarring nature of these events. Jesus went from proclaiming the invincibility of His Church established upon who He is – the Christ – to He must go to Jerusalem to die!

The Jews of the 1st century, Peter, and the rest of the disciples weren’t looking for a Messiah who “must go to Jerusalem to suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (vs. 21). Rejection, suffering, persecution, death, and resurrection weren’t categories they applied to the Messiah. And so maybe we can understand better Peter’s shock at what Jesus said.

According to vs. 22, “Peter took him (that is, Jesus) aside and began to rebuke him saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’” To be sure, we can understand Peter’s desire to protect Jesus. Peter doesn’t want Jesus to suffer.

Jesus’ response to Peter is almost brutal. “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” (vs. 23). Last week, Peter was the bold confessor of the faith. This week, he’s a satanic enemy. None of this seems right.

How can the Son of the Living God die? Is it even possible for the Christ to suffer and be killed? Can God suffer and die? Ask that question tomorrow morning over coffee and see what kind of responses you get! It's unseemly; it's just plain wrong. Get it out of your head, Jesus. This shall never happen to you! You can't die!!

Peter believes that the Christ, the Son of the living God, can't possibly demonstrate His divinity or His gracious love for His people by suffering and dying. Miracles, signs and wonders, are quite a different story. Walking on water, miraculously feeding thousands, casting out demons, raising the dead, that's more like what the Christ should be doing. God's Christ on a cross with a crown of thorns and spikes in His arms and feet is all wrong. This shall never happen to you!

Jesus says all this reasonable, well-intentioned sentiment is satanic. This is what happens when we speak without God's Word, without God's revelation that Jesus is the Christ (Luther, LW 67:288).

Good intentions, sincerity, and human reason are notoriously unreliable guides when it comes to the things of God. Without the sure Word of God, our good intentions, our genuine sincerity, our sound human reason will degenerate into the devilish things of man. They will lead us away from Jesus and eternal life. And yet, our day and age exalts the idea that a person can believe whatever he or she wants so long as he or she does so sincerely. And we are forbidden to question such sincerity. Your beliefs and values may not work for me but they provide meaning and purpose to you; so we are told to applaud them and affirm them in their sincere ideas. The Lord Jesus says such thinking is straight from the fiery pits of hell; it's demonic. The divine necessity is that the Christ must die. Anything opposed to that is a deceptive and damnable lie. Jesus must suffer and die if God is to be reconciled to man. Without the shedding of His precious blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. Without His bodily resurrection on the third day, there is no justification for us sinners. There can be no eternal peace, no rest for a troubled conscience, no hope to stand before God in His love and grace with the suffer, death, and resurrection of the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Dear people of God, that is why Satan wanted to keep Jesus from the cross: to undo God's saving will for the world. That is why the Devil wants us to stop preaching and believing and exalting the death and resurrection of Jesus. That's why the Sacraments are so often downplayed and marginalized. For they are visible sermons preaching Jesus' death and resurrection for the salvation of real, flesh and blood people. Any form of faith, whatever style of worship, any form of piety – call it Christian or

Biblical, give it whatever name you choose – that diminishes, ignores, or sidesteps the absolute primacy of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection for the salvation of the world is of the devil. It must be abandoned.

For you see, the way of the cross and resurrection isn’t only good and right for Jesus. It’s God’s will for each Christian too; God’s will for you and me. Listen to how Jesus extends His cross and resurrection to each of us in vs. 24, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” What Jesus is declaring to the disciples is that His path to Calvary and the empty tomb must also be the path of every disciple, with no exceptions. “Let him deny himself,” Jesus said, “and follow me” (vs. 24).

Christ’s standard for discipleship couldn’t be more extreme. Renounce who you are! Deny your own self-importance! Die to yourself so that you can follow Jesus. Jesus “wants the entirety of what we are, what we can, and what we do to be denied.” To follow Jesus is to cast aside your will, your understanding, your righteousness, wisdom and works and say rather with the apostle Paul (Luther, LW 67:292),

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8–11).

Having denied ourselves according to Christ’s command, let us prepare ourselves for temptation and struggle. We often use the phrase “bearing our cross.” It’s gets overused and misused as it is applied to every little inconvenience. I have a cold this morning. I guess I must bear my cross. This is not what Jesus is describing. Luther offers up this definition of what taking up one’s cross means, “Taking up the cross is willingly taking on and bearing the hatred of the devil, the world, the flesh, sin, death, etc. for the sake of the Word and faith” (LW 67:293). In other words, taking up the cross means following Jesus and His Word even when the world, your family and friends, even your own natural desires, are telling you there is a better, happier way. It means to suffer for the sake of Jesus and His Word.

It seems Peter learned this lesson well for he wrote in his epistle (I Peter 4:12–16):

¹²Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

Our Lord presses His teaching further with His description of our cross-shaped faith and life (vs. 25-26), "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life from my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?" To call your own shots and be the master of your own destiny is to follow a path ruin and eternal loss. Deny yourself and follow Me, says Jesus. Follow Jesus through the way of cross and resurrection. It's the daily life of baptism, of dying to sin and rising again in the righteousness of Jesus.

Jesus' call to faith is most challenging. But we must not hear today's teaching as meaning we look to ourselves and our own resources. Rather, the Lord's call is for us to die and live in Jesus. He promises to be our life and our salvation. He promises to take us to His cross and empty tomb all the way to His eternal kingdom. His Word and Spirit are with us. All good works and Christian daily living flow out of this saving, cross and resurrection shaped faith and trust in Jesus. May the apostle Paul's great confession from Galatians 2:20 be ours today, forever:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.