

Pentecost 14 / September 3, 2023

Matthew 16:24

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me

Have you ever gotten the right answer, but still been wrong? Just a few verses before our text, Peter correctly identified Jesus as the Christ. But, in our gospel this morning just a few verses later, he showed he had it all wrong. In the gospel last week Jesus asked the disciples “who do people say that I am?” There were various opinions, Elijah, Jeremiah and even the recently executed John the Baptist. Jesus asked, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter got it right saying, “You are the Christ the Son of the living God.” Jesus affirmed him, but then He said the strangest thing. He strictly charged them not to tell anyone. Aren’t we supposed to tell people about Jesus? Aren’t we supposed to tell people that Jesus is the Christ and encourage them to believe that He is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe? Why would Jesus strictly charge the disciples, “to tell no one that he is the Christ.” That sounds odd! Wasn’t that the purpose for which He called, trained and sent them?

In scholarly circles this is referred to as “The Messianic Secret.” It is theorized that Jesus had some mysterious reason for keeping His Messiahship secret. Really there is nothing mysterious about it. Peter got the right answer, but he obviously didn’t understand what it meant. This became painfully obvious a few moments later when Jesus said that as the Christ He must go to Jerusalem, be rejected, suffer, die and rise on the third day. Peter began to rebuke Jesus, insisting he would never allow this to happen to Him. There is a saying, “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” A person may know how to fire a gun, but that doesn’t mean they know how to use it safely. In fact, their little knowledge may get them into a lot of trouble. Probably the most famous scientific equation is the summation of Einstein’s theory of relativity. $E=MC^2$. If people know anything about Einstein and the theory of relativity they know $E=MC^2$. I know it too, but I never talk about it, because that’s all I know about it.

It was good for Peter and the disciples to know that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God, but they needed to know more before they were able to tell others. Specifically, they needed to know what it meant to be the Christ. In their religious imagination the Christ would be a glorious earthly king, who would bring peace, prosperity and power to the Jewish nation. He would crush their Roman enemies under His feet and exalt Israel as the head of the nations. Jesus would be Christ over a new world empire and they would reign with Him! Jesus understood things differently. He said as the Christ “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.” Furthermore, He said anyone who wants to follow Him as the Christ, must also take up his, or her cross and follow Him. As important as it is to know and believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, we must realize that it is the cross that sets Jesus apart from every other religious leader and distinguishes Him from all the prophets. On the cross Jesus did the work of the Christ, by suffering and dying to atone for our sins and for the sins of the whole world. In the cross we see Jesus is the Christ. We believe Jesus is the Christ and follow as His disciples by taking up our own crosses.

Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” This is shocking, because there is nothing more horrifying to fallen human nature than the cross. The cross as an instrument of judicial death, reminds us of our sin and its condemnation. In Genesis the Lord said to Adam, “you are dust and to the dust you shall return.” In Romans Paul wrote, “The wages of sin is death.” Death comes to all, because all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Death is frightening, but that is not what is most horrifying about the cross. The cross also bears witness to the seriousness of sin and the futility of doing good works to make peace in our relationship with God. The cross shows us that no one can make atonement for their own sins, or for the sins of others. In the words of Psalm 49 the cross shows us that, “no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice that he should live on forever and never see the pit.” Our sin is so serious and has caused such a great breach between us and God that only the Son of God could heal the breach and bridge the gulf; and the only way He could do it was through His sinless blood shed on the cross.

However, that’s still not what is most horrifying about the cross. You see those things are quite abstract. We all know intellectually that we are going to die, sometime in the indefinite future. It’s far away and so we don’t think about it much. We know our works could never atone for our sin, so we don’t worry about doing them. We realize the price Christ paid and we are grateful. The cross takes all those things away and we are glad. The most

horrifying thing about the cross is that Jesus says we too must bear it and follow Him; not to make atonement for our sins, but as a natural result of our relationship with Him. By believing Jesus is the Christ we have made three very powerful enemies; the world enthralled to the devil, our sinful flesh and the devil, who wants to control and destroy us. Like Peter we may want to avoid the cross, but to avoid the cross for the sake of an easy life in time, is to lose life in eternity. To take up our cross and follow Jesus is blessing in time and life in eternity. Jesus said, "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Taking up the cross and following Jesus means we must daily seek to drown our sinful nature in repentance in the water of baptism. It means we must renounce the devil and resist the temptations of the world. Taking up the cross means we must deny ourselves the desires of the sinful nature each and every day, as part of our faith and following of Christ. Taking up the cross means that with the prophets and apostles we will experience shame and suffer reproach for following Jesus. It means that when we are cursed, we must bless. It means that when we are wronged, we must forgive and not just once or twice, but infinitely. In the words of Paul in the letter to the Romans, bearing the cross means we must not return evil with evil, but instead overcome evil with good.

The cross is a daily, nagging never ending pain in the neck. And that is the reason it is most horrifying to our fallen human nature. And really that's why when Jesus spoke of His cross, Peter said, "This shall never happen to you." Peter didn't want this to happen to Jesus, because he didn't want it to happen to himself. But even as Jesus had to bear the cross before He entered His glory, so we must bear our cross before we receive the crown of His glory. Jesus warned the disciples that they would be persecuted and mistreated and even put to death because of their faith and witness to Him as the Christ the Son of the living God. He said, "If they hated me they will hate you. For the servant is not greater than the master." The cross challenges our faith and calls us to consider its value in our lives. The cross asks us if it is really worth the trouble following Jesus. The cross also gives us the answer, for through the cross Jesus won for us a treasure of forgiveness in time and life in eternity.

On the surface it seems that Peter is simply concerned for Jesus and His well-being. When Jesus speaks of the cross he is horrified. He cries out, "Lord may this never happen to you!" His words seem to express the concern of a man for his friend. But they really reflected Peter's concern for himself, disguised as concern for Jesus. Jesus knew this and this is why He responded with unmistakable anger saying, "Get behind me Satan." Peter expected certain things from following Jesus; power and prosperity when Jesus came into His kingdom. He knew that if anything happened to Jesus, all his plans would come to an abrupt end. Peter didn't want his dreams to die with Jesus. There had already been lots of dead Messiahs in Israel's history. The century during which Jesus lived and the century prior saw a number of men proclaim themselves the Messiah, lead an uprising against Rome and then die. Peter's hopes for power on earth and glory in time depended on Jesus being the Christ who lived, not the one who died.

Two failed Messiahs are mentioned in the book of Acts by the Pharisee Gamaliel as he urges the Jewish Ruling Council to take a wait and see attitude towards the apostles and the church. He said, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days Theudus rose up claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about 400, joined him. He was killed and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered." They had reached for a crown and instead received a cross. Peter wanted a crown for Jesus and himself and he didn't want a cross getting in the way. Like Peter we want a crown. We don't want hardship. We don't want suffering. But Jesus specifically says whoever wants to follow must follow him through the cross. Even as the cross was the means by which Jesus showed Himself the Messiah and won for us the victory over sin, the devil and death; so we follow Jesus by denying ourselves and taking up our crosses.

It is said, they will know we are Christians by our love. But really they will know we are Christians by the way we bear our cross. The cross is suffering that comes from obeying the word of the Lord. Jeremiah the prophet lamented the suffering that came to him, because of the word of the Lord. He said, "Woe is me, my mother that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them hate me." Jeremiah was hated, because He spoke a word from the Lord that people did not want to hear. Sometimes we must suffer mocking, endure ridicule and reproach, because of the word of the Lord.

The Lord's word says a lot of things about morality, sexuality and faith that are unpopular and politically incorrect, as far as today's world is concerned. In His word the Lord says He is God and apart from Him there is no other. Jesus says He is the way and the truth and the life and that people only come to the Father through Him.

That is religious bigotry in the opinion of the Western world in general and our North American Society in particular. Some people consider preaching salvation only in Jesus, as hate speech. The cross we bear is faithfulness to the word of the Lord, even if it brings suffering, shame and reproach.

The cross that we bear is the way in which we respond to mistreatment in our personal lives. It is our nature as human beings conceived with a sinful nature and born into a broken world, to return evil for evil and cursing for cursing. When someone says something hurtful to us, our first reaction is to say something cruel back to them. In the letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of the cross as the burden of resisting the temptation to respond to evil with evil; and instead of overcoming evil with good. He says "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Repay no one evil for evil...never avenge yourselves...to the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.'" Bearing the cross means being kind, not as a means to be cruel, but to effect healing in our relationship with another person; even as Jesus bore His cross to bring healing and peace to our relationship with the heavenly Father.

$E=MC^2$. I know the equation. I know E means energy, M means mass and C refers to the speed of light. The most important scientific equation in human history, I know it, but I haven't the faintest idea of how to apply it, or express it in my life. Unless you are a physicist it doesn't matter if you don't understand it. But it is most important that we understand and believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God. Jesus is the Saviour of all people and so all need to know and believe. Jesus has the words of eternal life. Whoever follows Him in faith receives forgiveness in time and life in eternity. Nothing is more important than that we believe these words and express our faith in Jesus by applying them to our lives in repentance, taking up our cross daily and following Jesus. Jesus asks, "For what will it profit a man if gains the whole world and loses his soul?" He promises blessings in time and life for eternity to all who follow Him in faith, saying, "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." God bless us with faith, faithfulness and the Holy Spirit as we follow Jesus. In His Name. Amen