



Sunday September 3, 2023
Matthew 16:21-28 (Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

I hate to admit this, but I have a somewhat embarrassing confession to make this morning. There's part of me...okay, most of me that just wants to run away as fast as I can from our Gospel reading this week, because truthfully, I don't really feel like preaching about suffering and loss, about denying ourselves and taking up our crosses, and about losing our lives in order to save them.

But hear me out. Because I feel like there are already more than enough challenging things these days that feel hopeless and catastrophic, and I just wish I could focus on a more comforting passage of Scripture. Something more like, *"Come to me, all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens,"* or, *"He leads me besides still waters,"* or, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."*

The thing is...deep down, I know that I can't. Turning away is precisely the shift we *can't* make in response to this week's Gospel; it's the shift that Peter makes and regrets. And in the depths of my faith I know that somehow Jesus's "bad" news is actually the Good News.

The Gospel writer Matthew tells us that Jesus has just praised and blessed Peter for recognizing him as the Messiah. And now Jesus begins to explain to his disciples that the Messiah must undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, be killed, and on the third day be raised from the dead.

Fortunately for us, we get to look at things from this side of the resurrection. But that also makes it more difficult for us to imagine the full effect that these ominous sounding words must have had on Jesus's disciples. However, I do wonder what would happen if for just a few moments we stepped outside of our safe and familiar to hear Jesus's words as his first listeners heard them so many years ago?

The disciple's had been banking their hopes that Jesus would lead them in a military revolution and overthrow their Roman oppressors. They had seen his miracles and witnessed his charismatic ability to draw admiring crowds. They had heard him proclaim the arrival of a new kingdom. *He* was their longed-awaited future. Their cherished dream. Their chance at liberation.

So then what could be more disorienting, more ludicrous than the news that their would-be champion was determined to walk straight into a death trap? To hand himself over not only to severe physical pain, but also to humiliation and disgrace? To surrender without a fight and suffer a common criminal's death?

And you know the rest of the story. Peter, eager and clueless as ever, scolds Jesus for his disturbing prediction. And then Jesus sharply puts Peter in his place, *"Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."* Then Jesus turns to the crowds and captures the essence of his Gospel message in just two sentences, *"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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."*

I don't know about you, but I can relate pretty well to Peter's uneasiness about this difficult teaching. Even now, centuries removed from the context in which Jesus lived and taught, I cringe as I consider the implications of his words. What exactly was he saying to his followers? What is he saying to us? Is he saying that he wants us to pursue suffering and death? Is he saying that a holy life isn't about *living* at all, but about dying?

Whenever I read this passage I'm always tempted to minimize what it asks of me. *"Sure, okay, I'll deny myself unnecessary spending and surfing on Instagram for a few months, and instead I'll pray more, be more generous, and even volunteer more."*

These are all good and worthy things, right? Except, I'm pretty sure these aren't what Jesus meant when he invited the crowds to lose their lives for the sake of the gospel. And definitely not what he meant when he sternly rebuked Peter who suggested Jesus avoid the cross placed before him.

My other temptation is to move in the complete opposite direction. To become so heavenly focused that the extreme self-denial strips my life of all pleasure, all celebration, and all joy. A single-mindedness that reduces the world to a grim mission field, motivated by loveless enthusiasm to simply fulfill a cross quota.

It's the kind of devotion that mistakes strictness for faithfulness. And I don't believe that *this* is what Jesus meant, either. Certainly, I can't recognize this in the Jesus who welcomed children, the Jesus who turned water into wine, the Jesus who advocated for the widow, the orphan, the prisoner, and the outcast.

So what then? What does it mean to truly deny ourselves? As we live in a culture that promotes immediate gratification, self-promotion, and individualism. How are we supposed to deny ourselves so that the gospel can thrive, here and now? How do we save our life by losing it for Jesus's sake in our 21st century society?



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Because right now, I'm asking myself these very questions in light of a world increasingly divided by anger, race, gender, economics, religion, politics, war, and violence.

So the questions for me become, "*where do I place myself amidst these crosses? What am I willing to put on the line or lose? And what do I stand to gain?*"

The uncomfortable truth is that most of the time I live in such crippling fear of suffering and death that I waste a huge amount of my mental, physical, and spiritual energy each day trying to prevent and avoid both.

I wonder what would Jesus say to the multi-million-dollar industries that invite us to deny our mortality through cosmetics, fashion, leisure, sex, entertainment, real estate, sports cars, weight loss, and beauty? What would he say to a culture that glorifies violence but cheapens death? What would he say to a global corporate economy that abuses and pillages the planet, instead of stewarding it with gentleness and care? What would he say to a notion of personal liberty that encourages us to hide behind our "rights," instead of accepting our communal responsibilities? What would he say to our frightened heart, that prioritizes self-protection over so much else that matters in this life?

What if Jesus's call is for us to stop clinging to this life so desperately? To step out of the vicious cycles of denial, achievement, terror, and violence that seek to cheat death, but in fact rob us of the abundant life Jesus came to give us. What would it look like for us to lay down our fears so that others might live? To willingly set aside our own interests and our own liberties, so that we can prioritize what Jesus called the "great commandments," to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves?

To take up a cross as Jesus did is to stand, always, in the center of the world's pain. Not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and then slither away, but to dwell there. To identify ourselves with those who are aching, weeping, screaming, and dying. To insist that our comfort isn't worth it unless the least and the lost can share in it, too.

Taking up the cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body that surrounds us and pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating their pain — no matter what it costs. It means accepting — against all the lies of our culture — that we *will* die. It means following up that courageous acceptance with the most important question we can ask given our inevitable death, "*how will we spend this brief, singular, God-breathed life?*"

Will we hoard it in fear, or give it away in hope? Will we protect ourselves with numbness and apathy, or experience the abundant life Jesus offers to those who ache, weep, and bleed alongside the world's suffering? Will we, like Peter, push suffering away at all costs — and in doing so, push Jesus away, too? Or will we follow the one we call Savior down the only road that actually leads to eternal life?

The actual scandal and strangeness of Jesus's death may be distant to us, but here's the bottom line: Jesus *died*. And not only that; Jesus died the humiliating death of someone unjustly accused.

Jesus willingly took the violence, the contempt, the indifference, and the arrogance of this world. He chose to be the victim, the scapegoat, the sacrifice. He refused to waver in his message of universal love, grace, and liberation, knowing that the message would cost him his life. He declared solidarity with those who are abandoned, oppressed, and marginalized.

He took an instrument of torture and turned it into a means of hospitality and grace for ALL PEOPLE, EVERYWHERE. He loved and he loved, and he loved all the way to the end.

Jesus rebukes Peter so harshly in this week's Gospel precisely *because* the temptation Peter holds out is so alluring, so deceptive, and so insidious: "*You don't have to do the hard thing. You don't have to take this faith business so seriously. You don't have to give up your own rights, privileges, and comforts. You don't have to die.*"

No, we don't — it's true. There *is* most certainly a spectator version of Christianity out there, and plenty of people decide to live it. But let's not pretend for a moment that it's the version Jesus calls us to. Let's not fool ourselves into assuming that sideline faith will grant us safety, immunity, joy, or blessing — because it won't. Those who save their lives will lose them. And those who lose their lives will save them. That's the truth Jesus proved when he died and rose from the grave. Thanks be to God. Amen!