

September 3, 2023  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH  
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 16:21 – 28

DENY YOURSELF AND FOLLOW JESUS.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Who do you say that Jesus is? That's the question that Jesus asked His disciples in our Gospel text last week. That's the question Jesus asks you today. **Who** do you say that He is? **What** did He do for you and **why** did He do it? Remember those three questions: Who, what, and why.

By the power of the Holy Spirit Peter perfectly articulated the divinely revealed truth that Jesus is indeed the **Christ**, the Son of the living God. As Rev. Nus said last week, the word "**Christ**" is not Jesus' last name. The word "**Christ**" is His title. It's His job description that means "**the Anointed One**." (ANLEX, 410) Peter confessing that Jesus is the "**Christ**" is not only an acknowledgement about **who** Jesus is... it's also an understanding of **what** Jesus has come to do.

Old Testament kings, priests, prophets were all **anointed** to do something. In confessing that Jesus is God's **Anointed One**, Peter is declaring that all the hopes of Israel come true in Jesus, God's own Son, whom the Father has **anointed** to accomplish His holy will. And while Jesus commends Peter for His great confession, Peter cannot even begin to grasp what exactly must take place to accomplish the will of God in fulfilling the Law and the Prophets.

Today's Gospel text immediately follows last week's. It's a turning point in St Matthew's Gospel. From this point forward, the death and resurrection of Jesus dominate Matthew's Gospel. If last week's text is considered Peter's great confession, perhaps this week's should be called Peter's great ignorant confusion. Our text says from the time of Peter's great confession:

**"... 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."** (Matthew 16:21)

Jesus **must** go to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and be raised. It is God's divine necessity. There is no other way for the Scriptures be fulfilled in Christ. (cf: Matthew 26:54) This is the way God has planned it. This is the way that Jesus will carry out God's plan with complete faithfulness. But that's not what Peter has in mind for God's Anointed. Suffering and dying was not in Peter's job description for the Christ. He didn't want a crucified, bloody, and dead Christ. He wanted a fun-loving and living Christ. He wanted a different plan. And that is exactly how you and I are. It's how sinful humans think about God.

You want to be happy. You want life to be fun. And who doesn't want life to be happy and fun? Who doesn't think God wants them to be happy? Who doesn't want to gain the whole world?

That's what our society tells you that you deserve – even if you cannot afford it. And there are entire industries built around delivering whatever it takes for you to gain the whole world. Borrow the money. Put it on your credit card and have fun! Eat, drink and be merry, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Even on Sunday mornings. Because like Peter, most people want the fun Jesus. For the old Adam, the true God is the god of fun and happiness, and his means of grace are status, possessions, and entertainment.

Peter thought he had a better idea. Just as Jesus began to announce His passion and resurrection, Peter takes Him aside and rebukes Him. Peter doesn't believe that is necessary for Jesus to suffer and die on the cross. May it never happen, says Peter. (cf: Matthew 16:22) But meddling and interfering with the will of God never ends well. Notice that Jesus doesn't pause. He doesn't think twice. Just as quickly as He said:

***“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!”*** (Matthew 16:17)

... at Peter's great confession:

***“... he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan!’”*** (Matthew 16:23)

Jesus calls Peter Satan because Satan is the adversary. In Peter's rebuke of Jesus, he is the adversary of God. (cf: ANLEX, 346) Peter's way of thinking is every bit a stumbling block and temptation to Jesus as was the devil's temptations in the wilderness. (cf: Matthew 4:1–11) Peter isn't thinking of the things of God but the things of man and the old Adam. Peter wanted a different Jesus. He wanted the fun Jesus. He wanted a different life story than the one that God the Father had planned for him. So do you and I. And for that we must repent. For such are the things of Satan.

Peter doesn't want Jesus to face the cross but to skip the cross and go straight to the glory. But it doesn't work that way. You can't go straight to glory. You must first go through suffering. You must first go through the cross. Jesus says to you, just as He told his disciples:

***“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*** (Matthew 16:24)

Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem for His appointment with death upon the cross unlike the crucifixion of no other. It's a huge cross. The word of this cross, Christ crucified to atone for the sins of the world, is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (cf: 1 Corinthians 1:18) The nature of Jesus' suffering and death speaks volumes about the brokenness mankind and the world as well as God's plan in Christ to reclaim mankind and the world and reign over it in grace. The cross of Christ is exactly what it takes to make peace between God and man. It was necessary that Jesus hand Himself over into suffering and death so that all people and all creation be saved from sin, death, and the devil. But it doesn't end there. After dying, the Christ will be raised to eternal life. First the cross. Then the glory.

There is a smaller cross for all who follow Jesus. Taking up your cross and following Jesus is not some sort of prerequisite for discipleship. No. In our text, Jesus is speaking to all His disciples. He is speaking to you. Taking up your cross and following is the “***job description***” of the one who is Jesus' disciple. Those who belong to Jesus and follow Him in this world must follow in the same path. And the while you would think that your first and primary obstacle to following Christ would come from the world, your first enemy lies within your heart. Sin has so completely

infected and corrupted you that Jesus says the first thing you must do if you're going to come after Him – is – you must deny yourself.

There are so many sinful desires in our hearts. One of them is your desire and mine that God deal with suffering and evil in the world in the way we think is right, through power and what appears to be success. You want to pray: “*God, just take it away in one fell swoop and eliminate it for all believers.*” But that’s not the way God has chosen to deal with the world at this point in history.

Jesus says to deny yourself. That means, it’s not about you. It’s all about Jesus. Keep calm. Remember your baptismal promises. Deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow Jesus. Following Jesus is following in the way of humble obedience and submission to the will of your heavenly Father just as Jesus humbly obeyed and submitted to the will of the Father. In His hidden wisdom God has ordained that the Christian shouldn’t necessarily experience glory in in this life, but should experience the same lowliness which characterized the earthly life of Christ. (cf: 1 Peter 4:1–2) First the cross, then the glory.

Remember those three questions I asked earlier? **Who** do you say that Jesus is? **What** did He do for you and **why** did He do it? Luther answers them in his explanation to the Second Article of the Apostle’s Creed where he confesses:

***I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.*** (SC, II, 4)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the Holy Spirit has called you to faith either in the preaching of the Gospel or in the waters of Holy Baptism, and made you a disciple of Christ. He forgives you all of your sins, your sins of believing you deserve a happy and fun life with a fun Jesus. Your sin of not wanting and trusting in God’s omniscient plan for your life. Your sin of desiring to gain the whole world, skipping the cross and going straight to glory.

The anointed One of God calls every disciple, every Christian, to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him. It’s the “**job description**” of the one who is Jesus’ disciple. It’s not something that you can do on your own, so God gave you the gift of the Holy Spirit so that might endure. What is it to take up one’s cross? It’s not something you chose. It’s something that God, in His wisdom, **allows** and **empowers** you to endure to strengthen your faith in Him. In wide sense it’s the Christian’s daily struggle with pride and despair, with sin and temptation, and self-denial. Martin Luther writes:

***“A Christian, just because he is a Christian, is subjected to the dear cross, so that he must suffer at the hands of men and of the devil, who plagues and terrifies him with tribulation, persecution, poverty, and illness and inwardly, in his heart, with his poisonous darts. The cross is the Christians’ sign and watchword in their holy, precious, noble, and blessed calling, which is taking***

*them to heaven. To such a calling we must render full due and accept as good whatever it brings.*” (Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, vol. 3, 69, fn. 113)

In the narrow sense, your cross is suffering for your confession of *who* Jesus is, *what* He has done and continues to do for you, and *why* He did it. It’s suffering for sharing Gospel story of Christ crucified for you and for all mankind, and His gracious forgiveness of sins, mercy and salvation for all who believe. It’s suffering for speaking the truth about God’s created order that boys are boys, and girls are girls, and that God’s design for marriage is only between one man and one woman, and that all human life is precious from conception until natural death.

Jesus says, take up your cross and follow Him. Endure trials, tribulations, and persecutions, serve and love others just as God in Christ, serves and loves you. To attempt to save your own life ultimately results in the loss of everything. Even if you gain the whole world you will lose your soul to eternal death and damnation. (cf: Matthew 16:26) But quite the contrary, to trust, believe in, and follow Jesus, you reap all the gifts that Christ won for you on Calvary’s cross: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. First the cross, then the glory. Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too might walk in newness of life in His kingdom which has no end. (cf: Romans 6:4)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,  
Amen.