

“Living a Life that Matters”

Matthew 16: 21-28

August 31, 2014 P12A

This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI.

Dear Sisters and Brothers, grace and peace be with you all.

This morning’s words from Jesus are among his hardest: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” This is one of those passages most of us could do without. Jesus says other things we like better: “Come to me, all you who are weary and I will give you rest.” Or “God so loved the world.” Those are comfortable passages, safe, providing some cushion in a sharp and often frightening world.

But “deny yourself and take up your cross”? Who needs that, when it’s hard enough to pay the bills or face pressures at home or work, when it’s hard enough to just hold on to faith in a loving God in a world that is full of threats and fear?

Some context for this passage before us: The disciples and Jesus were off by themselves, taking a breather between rounds with their critics and doing big things like feeding thousands of people. Just prior to Jesus words before us today, he asks his disciples who they thought he really was, and Peter gave the right answer. “You are the Christ” he said, “the Son of the living God.” Jesus responds by rewarding Peter by calling him a rock, the rock on which Jesus would build his church.

But Peter’s glory doesn’t last long, and what happens next is the passage before us today. Jesus begins to tell his disciples what is about to be required of him, how he is about to walk right into a trap set for him in Jerusalem, where he will suffer, be killed, and be raised from the dead. In reaction to this news Peter explodes! “God forbid, Lord!” he says. “This will never happen to you.” This prediction is simply too much for Peter to imagine. He wondered out loud why wouldn’t Jesus go the other way and avoid such a horrible ending. Why would Jesus take a risk he didn’t have to take?

Have you ever known someone who went headlong into a situation full of risk? The news from time to time runs stories about them: the man who rushes into the burning building to see if anyone is still inside; the woman who plunges into the river to rescue a child caught up in flood water. Those are the dramatic stories, but there are quiet ones too: the doctor who travels to Liberia to care for Ebola victims; the teacher who quits her job in the suburban school and goes to teach kids in an inner city school.

It is only human to admire such people, but there is an equally human part of us that is taken aback by them and afraid for them. We hear of such people and the dangerous things they do and like Peter, we want to say “God forbid! Why would you do that? Why take such a risk, isn’t there an easier way to do what you want to do? What if you get hurt? What if you catch a disease or are killed? God forbid something like that should happen to you!”

That is, in so many words, what Peter says to Jesus, and right or wrong, Peter has a way of saying what the rest of us are thinking. Over and over Peter is the disciples’ spokesman who says the things the rest do not dare to say, or asks the questions they dare not ask. “God forbid, Lord!” Peter says when Jesus predicts his own death. Then Jesus explodes.

“Get behind me, Satan!” he says to Peter. “You’re a hindrance to me; you’re not on the side of God, but the side of people.” What a shock for the disciples to hear Jesus call Peter, Satan. Just a day earlier Peter was getting praised by Jesus for calling him the Son of the Living God. What did he do wrong? What was his sin? All Peter did was protest out loud the forecast that Jesus would suffer and die.

But as far as Jesus was concerned, it was Satan talking. Satan – the ancient tempter always seeking to give people the alternative to being faithful to the will of God. Satan – offering safer, flashier, enticing

alternatives to doing that which God calls us to do and be. In this case, the temptation is for Jesus to play things safe, skip the trip to Jerusalem, elude his enemies and lead his holy revolution without placing himself at risk.

Think about it – why does Jesus silence Peter so harshly? Maybe it was a real temptation for Jesus to consider Peter offering him a way out, a detour around Jerusalem with all its risk of suffering and death. Perhaps this possibility seemed real to Jesus for a moment, before he clears his head and shouts toward Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not of God, but on the side of people.”

I’m a bit troubled by what Jesus says here. Does he mean that any of us who pray to be delivered from suffering, from death, are on the side of people – and that the side of God is revealed only for those willing to suffer and die? Does Jesus mean that all of us who want to be on God’s side had best get ourselves killed and soon? That troubles me. I want to believe that God *gives* me life, not that God is eager to take it away. Doesn’t God want me to be happy? Doesn’t God care about my comfort and safety?

The blunt answer, according to this bible passage, is “No!” God doesn’t care about my comfort and safety or whether I’m happy or not. What God cares about, with all the power of God’s holy being, is the *quality* of my life. Not just my life, mind you, not just the continuation of my breath and the health of my cells, but the quality of my life – the depth and scope of my life, and yours too.

The deep secret of Jesus’ hard words in this passage is that our fear of suffering and death robs us of life, because fear of death always turns into fear of life --- which then moves us into a stingy, cautious way of living that is not really living at all. The deep secret of Jesus’ hard words is that the way to have abundant life is not to save it, but to spend it, to give it away. Why? Because life cannot be shut up and saved any more than a bird can be put in a shoebox and store it in a closet.

Life, yours and mine, cannot be shut up and saved any more than fresh spring water can be put in a mason jar and kept in the cupboard. It will remain water, and if you ever open it you can probably still drink it, but it will have lost its essence, its life, which is to be poured out, to be moving, living water, rushing downstream to share its wealth without ever looking back.

Peter wanted to prevent Jesus from doing that. He didn’t want Jesus’ life to be spilled, wasted. He wanted to save it, preserve it, to find a safer, more comfortable way for Jesus to be Lord. What Peter forgot was that Jesus’ supply of life was never-ending, like the water that continually streams from a spring, sent forth to refresh a dry, parched world.

Peter missed that part of what Jesus said – and to be honest, I have too. Perhaps you, too? Listen again: “*Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*” *And on the third day be raised.* Peter misses that part and so did I. We never got that far. We got stuck on the suffering and death part. We got that far and said, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you,” without finishing the sentence, without noticing that after the suffering and death part there is life again, abundant life, life for Jesus and all of us that can never be cut off.

You know, we will never get that far if we let suffering and death throw us off the track, if we let the fear of those things keep us from sticking our necks out, taking the risks that make life worth living. You can try to save your own life. You can try to stockpile it, being very, very careful about what you say yes to, and what you give to others. You can be fearful about whom you let into your life.

You can live that way, but don’t expect to enjoy it very much or accomplish much with your life. And don’t expect that when your life finally comes to an end, many people will notice that you are gone. “For those who want to save their life will lose it,” Jesus says to his disciples, “and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

My friends, living this life of faith is not about being a daredevil. My words today aren’t about signing up for skydiving lessons or doing dangerous things for the thrill of it. This is a message about a living a life that

matters – a life for Jesus’ sake – and about refusing to put our own comfort and safety ahead of living a life that pours itself out for others as a matter of course; a life that spends without counting the cost, knowing that there’s always more life where our own life comes from. And even when our own lives run out, God will have more life in store for us, because our God is a God who never runs out of life.

Jesus says “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (v 25) Those will never be easy words to hear, but they are not, in the final analysis, an invitation to follow Jesus into death, but into life, both now and later on. We can only follow him if we do not get tripped up on suffering and death and so fearful and preoccupied by those that we forget who we are and whose we are and why we are alive in the first place.

You don’t have to live long to learn that there is a certain amount of pain involved in being human and a good bit more involved in being fully human, fully alive, especially in a world that counts on our fear of death and uses it to keep us in line. Jesus’ enemies counted on his fear of death to shut him up and shut him down. But they were wrong. He may have been afraid, but he didn’t let fear stop him. Jesus didn’t get stuck on the suffering and death part.

So what then for us today? The greatest hope to address the largest challenges that face human life in this world – lies in us, my friends. It lies in all who take up the cross, serving others with the abundant life that is born in us and yet awaits us, too – through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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