

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost-Year A

Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

“Risky living”

August 28th, 2011

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page at Trinity Lutheran Church

Here we are on Sunday morning, last week is gone and another week awaits. We like to sit back in worship and hear words that calm our hearts and inspire our spirits such as “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) or “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not die but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) Scripture passages like these are appealing, safe, they give us a sense of encouragement in a world that can be overwhelming.

Today Jesus says, **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”**

That’s not inspiring or encouraging. These words are hard to hear. We could easily gloss over these words saying they were said only to the disciples, or they’re for the die-hard followers of Christ like monks and those who choose to live outside of culture. It’s tempting to excuse ourselves from them since we have bills to pay and other things to do.

But they are for us...so let’s give them a chance.

Today, we’ll focus on risks. Specifically, taking risks for something better in order to live the life God wants you to live as a follower of Jesus Christ.

If you were here last week, you heard Pastor Heather preach on Peter, the disciple whom Jesus said was the ‘rock on which he would build his church.’ Peter is feeling proud about himself and confident in Jesus’ mission.

Our gospel reading follows on the heels of that reading with these words:

“From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders...and be killed.”

Typical of Peter, he’s the first to speak, “God forbid it, Lord!”

It’s all too much for Peter to fathom. The young, wise teacher and leader, his friend, predicting his imminent fate!

We can easily admire leaders who encounter risk but it’s also natural to be taken aback by them, to be fearful for their safety and well-being. We’re interested but reserved at the same time. That is why Peter says, “God forbid!” We’d say the same thing to such a leader. “Isn’t there an easier way? Can’t it be avoided? What if something bad happens?”

Who do you admire for taking a great risk?

Forty eight years ago today a speech was given by a man whose life was characterized by taking great risks. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his transformative “I Have a Dream Speech” at the 1963 March for Jobs and Freedom in Washington, D.C. It was the largest demonstration in our nation’s capital up to that point with over 250,000 people present.

Dr. King knew of the risks involved in his leadership role in breaking down barriers of segregation and racial inequality. He was arrested numerous times, his wife and daughter escaped injury when their house was firebombed; in 1958 a would-be assassin stabbed him in the chest with a letter opener as he signed books in Harlem; he was assassinated on April 4, 1968 at 39 years of age.

Today marks the culmination of twenty years of planning, fundraising, and construction that have led to a memorial, the first of its kind on the National Mall, to honor a non-president and an African-American.

These words from “I Have a Dream” were the foundation for this memorial:

“With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

Clayborne Carson, director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. research and education institute at Stanford University stated the following in the USA Today last weekend:

“King symbolizes a movement that changed America.”

Change only comes through taking a risk.

Jesus describes his mission and the subsequent risk, Peter bursts out with “God forbid!” and Jesus responds, “**Get behind me Satan!**”

We grew up saying sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. Can you imagine how Peter felt in hearing this from Jesus? The confident guy who moments earlier was the foundation of the church is now a stumbling block in Jesus’ path? What’d he do wrong?

From the beginning of time, Satan has always offered alternatives to God’s will. These alternatives are often easier, more appealing, flashier. They are the temptations that we face every day. All lead us to do things, and be the person, God has not called us to be.

For Jesus, that temptation is to play it safe, bypass death in Jerusalem and save the world without any risk to himself.

Jesus’ words are harsh, bold, and direct...perhaps even offensive. From them we learn how to approach temptation. To address it sternly, in the moment, slam the door so it’s hold does not gain strength on us.

Jesus emphasizes this claim by saying, “**If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.**” The troubling thing about these words is that he seems that all of us on God’s side should be ready and willing to suffer and die.

Doesn’t God care about our happiness, comfort and safety?

The resounding answer? No.

God doesn’t care about those things. What God cares about with all of God’s power and being, is the *quality* of your life.

The quality...meaning the depth, scope, and zeal of your life.

The meaning behind Jesus’ harsh rebuke of Peter is that our fear of suffering and death robs us of life since fear of death evolves into a fear of life. A stingy, cautious, inherently selfish way of living that isn’t living at all.

The words of the Son of God tell us that the way to have abundant life...life that is joyful beyond compare, rich in blessings, and characterized by a satisfying sense of peace...is to give our life away. To live this way involves a great deal of risk since we are taught to have more, keep things for ourselves, play it safe.

This is what Jesus was sent to do it’s just that Peter forgot that Jesus, as the Son of God, had so much to give. He was a well-spring of divine blessings for a dry world.

That is the good news today, “**From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders...and be killed. And on the third day be raised.**”

Peter got stuck on the suffering. Don’t we do the same? Don’t we easily get stuck on the suffering, the bad news, the negative aspects of our day? Risks for something better become bigger than they really are and opportunities for something better are lost.

You can live for yourself; being very careful about what you say yes to; letting only the harmless people into your life...those who agree with your views and beliefs; be wary about going outside your comfort zone and doing something different yourself.

You can live that way, but don't expect to enjoy it very much, to accomplish much, and don't expect to be missed by others when you live safe and comfortable because no one will notice that you're gone.

Jesus is calling us to not let our fears and selfishness hinder us from taking risks that make life worth living.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Christ's words to us today are about living a life that matters. A life for Christ's sake that pours itself out as a standard practice, it gives of itself without counting the cost, and doing so with the confidence that God will always give us more life to do so.

Once we live here, we'll continue to live in a world that counts on fear, the negative and death to keep everyone in line. Jesus' enemies counted on the negative, fear and death to shut him up and shut him down...but they were wrong.

Was Jesus afraid? I'm sure he was terrified...but it didn't stop him.

He didn't stop because he saw something better, something beyond what had been experienced before, and it was worth every risk to reach it...and he didn't stop until he got there. His prediction came true, ***“And on the third day be raised.”***

To follow Jesus, the great Son of God and shepherd of the sheep, means going beyond our limits of comfort and security to risk living a life worth living.

We do this when we cherish our relationships in on-going unique ways, speaks highly of others and words of forgiveness when they are needed, giving of our time to the benefit of others, taking moments of our day in prayer with God.

Jesus says, **“Take up your cross and follow me.”**

Let us do so and seize the joy of heaven in our midst...confident that eternal glory will be ours. It is then that the negative influences, our fears, and the darkness of death are overcome by God's love and grace. Our days will then be marked by greater happiness, comfort, safety, and peace.

Amen.