

Sermons from West Denmark



West Denmark Lutheran Church Luck, Wisconsin westdenmark.org

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Matthew 16:21-28

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Our passage today immediately follows Peter’s brilliant outburst naming Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The disciples know what should come next—now that they know they’re in the presence of the Messiah, the deliverer of God’s people, they’re excited to start drumming up support for storming Jerusalem and Herod’s castle. They’re making plans for post-Roman-occupation Israel, with Jesus as the glorious king and themselves as his brilliant deputies.

But Jesus has a different idea of what follows from being the Messiah. “From that time...” he begins to break the news to the disciples of what it really means to be God’s Messiah. This is the first of four predictions of Jesus’ death that punctuate the second half of Matthew like an ominous drum.

Peter, worried and confused, takes him aside to talk some sense into him. He says, “You know, Jesus, this isn’t the way you rev up your followers.” Even though Peter knows he’s stepping out of line to talk this way to his teacher, he’s pretty sure he knows the best way forward, that Jesus has somehow missed the best strategy for optimal Messianic success.

We preachers vilify Peter all the time for his impudence and recklessness, but he’s saying what any of us, if we were any kind of good friends, would have said. “Don’t throw your life away, Jesus! Things can still be great!” The literal translation for Peter’s words is “God be merciful to you!” Of course we would have said that.

But Jesus’ sharp reply tells us that something more is going on. Maybe Peter is just trying to preserve his friend, but what Jesus hears in his words goes so much deeper. Peter is offering Jesus an easy way out—a path to glory and conquest that he rightly deserves, as the Son of God—a sweet and scrumptious alternative to the suffering and death toward which he knows God is directing him.

It’s the same stuff as the wilderness, when the devil met him and offered him power, comfort, adulation in exchange for his allegiance. So it’s no wonder that Jesus meets Peter’s rebuke with the same language he used in the wilderness, when he said, “Away with you, Satan!” Now, when he says “Get behind me, Satan!” he’s choosing again to follow God’s will, instead of his own.

I imagine Peter drawing back as if slapped. Abruptly calling your own disciple “Satan” is a pretty good attention-getter.

But Jesus doesn’t say “Away with you,” to Peter, like he said to the devil. He says, “Get behind me.” Not “Get away from me” but “Get back behind me where you can follow me. Get back to being my disciple. Let’s not listen to the devil. Get back into relationship with me.” He doesn’t give up on Peter.

Peter, the rock on which Jesus builds the church, the representative of the church, has said no to Jesus. And the church that Peter built has more often than not followed his example and continued to say no to Jesus.

But Jesus shows us a different way. He says, whoever wants to save their life will lose it and whoever is willing to give their life over to me will save it. He says, "If anyone would come after me (if anyone wants to get behind me, like Peter), let them deny themselves and take up their cross." To "take up your cross" has become a cliché today, but Jesus' first hearers knew that the only reason to take up your cross was to carry it to the place of your own crucifixion. It's really a shocking metaphor for discipleship, like saying, "Go volunteer for death row. Run the power to the electric chair and then take a seat."

To deny yourself, to take up your cross, doesn't mean to go, virtuously, without chocolate, or to live life as a doormat or a self-flagellant, but rather to surrender your will to God's, like Jesus did. Faced with the choice between following your instinct of self-preservation and the danger and risk of following God, you take the risk. To be willing to follow God's rule of love and mercy even when the cost is steep. To put your pride and ideals and vision on the chopping block and wonder what God could possibly give you in return. To pursue, at any cost, the abundant life God offers even when the shiny, flimsy life of self-glorification flickers at your fingertips.

Jesus tells Peter where he started on the wrong path. Instead of setting his mind on the things of God, he had started setting his mind on the things of the flesh. This thought is closely echoed in Colossians 3, where it says, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on things on the earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

We used to sing these verses in my youth group. It was a favorite; we would sing it lustily in our youth leader's car. I wonder now what it must have sounded like, a car full of youngsters belting out into the night: "Ye are dead! Ye are dead!"

We had no idea, teenagers that we were, what any of it meant, to take up our cross, how we might be called to follow Jesus, the things we held dear that needed to die in order for us to follow him.

When you follow someone really closely, I mean right on their heels, nobody can see you, you've been eclipsed by the person you're following. Maybe that's what it means, to give our will over to Christ, that we so closely follow his law of love and mercy that when people look at us they don't see us anymore; they see Christ. At that moment, we have died, we're no longer in the picture, but the good news is, our

life is hidden with Christ in God. We have been so eclipsed by Christ's love that we have died in it, but our life is still there, hidden, buried in the abundant love of God.

I don't think there's any method I can give you that will start you on this path. I can tell you what it might look like: we read it in Romans today, what it looks like to pursue the exact opposite of empire and power and self: holding fast to what is good. Loving one another with genuine love. Outdoing one another in showing honor. Fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, constant in prayer. Contributing to the needs of the saints; hospitality. Blessing those who persecute you, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep. Living in harmony with one another. Associating with the lowly, not the powerful. Not being wise in your own sight. Repaying no one evil for evil but with good, if they're hungry.

It's a beautiful vision of how we should be in the world, what it might look like to not follow in the footsteps of Peter, but to surrender our idea of justice to God's vision of mercy. It's worth a lifetime of pursuit. The point of this community is to remind one another of these values and help each other work toward them.

And I can guarantee you that, as often as not, you will fall short.

That's where Jesus' ominous sounding declaration at the end of our passage comes in. "For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what they have done." Jesus already came in glory, not the Messianic glory Peter expected but his glory looked like the cross, which he pursued to the end, and it was there that he repaid no one evil for evil, but he forgave. He brought all our debts, all our shortcomings to the cross and he gave us mercy and grace instead.

And so we're free to live the abundant life he offers, free of fear and shallow pursuit, to get back behind Jesus and see where he leads us.