

“And now the Mission”

Matthew 16:21-28

Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2020, August 30, 2020

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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The Gospel reading today continues the conversation that Jesus had with His disciples at the place called Caesarea Philippi. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is,” Jesus asked (Mat. 16:13). “Who do you say that I am,” He asked (Mat. 16:15). Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mat. 16:16). “Blessed are you Simon, Son of John,” Jesus said back to Peter (Mat. 16:17.) “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mat. 16:17).

And now the conversation continues. Jesus began to show His disciples that it is necessary that Jesus go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, that is, the leaders of the people of Israel, and be killed and arise on the third day (Mat. 16:21). Necessary.

So first Jesus draws out from His disciples the declaration of who He is. Then He teaches them what His mission is as the Christ, the Son of the living God. He must be faithful to God the Father at all costs, thus fulfilling the First Commandment and all the other Commandments with it. This will put Him at odds with the leaders and disappoint the people. So He must suffer and die. But His dying is an atoning death for us. Then He must defeat evil, the Devil, and death in rising from the dead. He must accomplish redemption in the forgiveness of sins and the gift of righteousness for His fallen creation, for us human beings. He must accomplish the promise of everlasting life and resurrection from the dead for us. He must fulfill the Father’s love and grace. He must do this as the Christ, the Son of the living God.

What Peter hears, however, are the words “rejection,” “suffering many things,” “being put to death.” He speaks up again. He comes up to Jesus and asserts quite emphatically, strongly, and self-assuredly: “May God be merciful to you, Lord. This shall by no means ever happen to you” (Mat. 16:22).

Has Peter lost His head? Just a few moments ago Peter had declared that Jesus is the Son of God. Now Peter is asserting that Jesus does not know what He is talking about.

Jesus turns toward Peter. Jesus speaks a lightning strike: “Get behind Me, Satan. You are not thinking the things of God but the things of men” (Mat. 16:23).

How inconstant we human beings are. In one moment, it was the Father revealing who Jesus is to Peter. In the next, Peter contradicts what Jesus teaches about His mission. Now Jesus must say: “Get behind me Satan.” He calls Peter Satan.

The word Satan means adversary. It is a name in the Scriptures for the Devil. “Peter, you have become My adversary,” Jesus says. “You have become an instrument of that proud and arrogant spirit that first sinned against God and taught humanity how to sin, how to be mindful of things of man and not the things of God.” Jesus now calls Peter by the name of this ancient foe and adversary of God, of humanity, and of all that is true, good, beneficial, and right.

Jesus calls Peter Satan because Peter has placed himself in the position of persuading Jesus away from His mission. Jesus you must be mistaken. So Jesus says to Peter, “You are a cause of stumbling for me. You are putting temptation in my path, just like Satan does. You are being an instrument of Satan to turn me away from My Father’s mission, which I must fulfill. Peter, you are not thinking like God thinks, but like fallen, human flesh thinks, like the Devil thinks. You

are not pursuing God's truth, God's ways, the redemption God accomplishes, the salvation God prepares. You are pursuing human ways, the ways of the world, and what fallen human flesh and the world would regard as redemption and salvation and the way to achieve its own conception of such things."

We hear Jesus call Peter Satan. This leads me to ask: what does Satan look like? How do we expect Satan to manifest himself? Will it be like that monster like figure, all in red, with horns, and legs and feet of a goat? Not usually.

On that occasion, Satan looked like Peter, a regular human being. Today, Satan could look like a nice, articulate, good looking, fun, entertaining person. But we do not know Satan by the way he looks. We know Satan by the doctrine he brings, by what he does. What he does is always contradict God's word and distort and pervert the Gospel, the mission of Jesus. He perverts the Gospel by turning it into worldly glory, and diverting away from the forgiveness of sins and redemption for eternal life.

What was Peter thinking? We aren't told for certain, but here are some probable things. I think the Scripture does not tell us exactly what Peter was thinking because then it would be too definite, and then we would be tempted to say: "See I am not doing what Peter did, I am not thinking the things of men," even though I would be. So the Scripture leaves open the possibilities to cast a wide net.

Peter could have been being sentimental. He does not want Jesus to suffer. We can't really blame him for that, though when it comes to Jesus's mission, sentimentality can be deadly.

It could have been his own fear. It is not difficult to imagine a pang of fear going through Peter's gut when Jesus spoke those words about His mission. If Jesus is going to be rejected, suffer many things, and be killed at the hands of the authorities, then Peter could be in danger of these things too as His disciple.

It could have been more conceptual in terms of what the Messiah was supposed to be like; what His salvation was supposed to look like, and how He would accomplish it. If this is what Peter was thinking, then he was thinking of the Messiah in terms of earthly salvation and ideas of what success should look like in terms of results that the world and human nature would understand; power, popularity, giving people what they want to hear and obtaining a great number of followers. Specifically for Peter, the Messiah should restore the fortunes of the Kingdom of David, destroy the Romans, and rule over all people with the sword and earthly power. It is obvious that a suffering Messiah, a Messiah that would allow Himself to be put to death, could not fulfill any of these things that Peter may have been thinking and feeling.

In our day, the Messiah should be a Messiah of political and economic salvation, He should be popular, charismatic and deliver the moon. He should have the answer for everything and provide the right policy and law and course of action that will make everything right. What good does the forgiveness of sins and being right with God in Christ's redemption do? That is not very exciting and does not seem very helpful; except to the soul that realizes forgiveness and the promise of God's grace and love is the difference between life and death. And then we must realize this: any human being who has been given in worldly terms what they think the Messiah must give, would still need the forgiveness of sins and hope of everlasting life that the Messiah accomplished through His death and resurrection, for this world and its ways are coming to an end and stand under God's judgment.

What is Jesus's response to thinking the things of men? Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.

Deny ourselves. There is a huge assumption Jesus is making in this that relates to a

fundamental battleground between God and Satan in our hearts and minds. This assumption is that not everything we human beings think and feel is the truth or leads us to the truth; not everything we think makes sense is consistent with the Gospel and the ministry of the Gospel. God does not necessarily agree with everything we think and feel. And this goes for society as well. Not everything society says and stands for is consistent with what God thinks.

To deny oneself means, in the first instance, to embrace this basic assumption that Jesus makes and to admit that just because I feel it, just because I think it, just because it makes sense to me, just because it makes sense to the world, does not make it true, and does not make it consistent with what God tells us in His word. And the danger is that we can be thinking that everything is alright with God when we follow the thinking of human beings and society, when it really isn't.

Take up our cross. Being faithful to God does not mean taking the path of least resistance; it does not mean following the definition of success as the world sees it. It does mean being willing to suffer for faithfulness to God's word and Gospel over against the world.

Truth is not easy. This is such an important basic assumption of sound character in anything, as well as in the fight of good against evil, of justice and liberty against tyranny, of remaining faithful to Jesus and the Gospel, which means also remaining faithful to God. It is a basic assumption of remaining faithful to Christ that the path of least resistance, the easy way, the way of acquiescence and accommodation as a basic operating assumption, leads to acquiescing to evil, to apostasy, to embracing what God condemns, to placing oneself on the wrong side of the final judgment, to not recognizing the redemption the Messiah brings. To hold to the good, to pursue the good, to hold to Christ and the Gospel as God's word defines it, may mean suffering and dying for it.

But where can we get the courage and the character to deny oneself, to take up the cross? Follow me, Jesus says. Jesus Himself did this faithfully as God the Son. He is not like an earthly authority that issues edicts for the people to follow but exempts himself or herself from them. He is the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

He now and always extends His hand of friendship to us in the forgiveness of our sins, the forgiveness of the ways in which we have not denied ourselves but embraced ourselves, the ways in which we have taken the path of least resistance contrary to God's word. And in this forgiveness He makes His grace and love the foundation of our lives and sets us on our feet again. And in this forgiveness the Spirit lives to embolden and encourage us from within through God's word to hold fast to who Christ is and His mission, to walk the walk of faithfulness to God, where the world and the way human beings think would divert us; to seek the truth in all things, according to the way such truth is discovered in the particular thing we are talking about; to follow Jesus and God's word in the teaching about ultimate things, faith, and values. Jesus does not require us to do something that He, as the Son of the living God, has not already done. And He and the Spirit are with us every step of the way as we seek to live in the path Christ Himself has put us on, as He Himself inspires us to seek to live this way. How well then we should know God's word and Christian teaching.

All of this makes me want to pray, and pray like this: "Lord Jesus, thank you for dying and rising for me and all people, for our redemption that you have won in denying yourself and taking up your cross and following the Father. Now strengthen me through faith in you and by the Spirit to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow you. I can't do this in my own strength, but I can sufficiently enough as you are my inspiration and life. And lead me on in your everlasting kingdom, which you have won for me." Amen.