

Sermon for September 3, 2017 – “Bearing Crosses”

22nd Sunday in OT, Year A – Text: Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:(13-20), 21-27

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Jesus is walking with His disciples. He asks them: **“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”** They bat this around for a while before Jesus finally asks them: **“But what about you? Who do you say I am?”** Peter, bless his heart, steps up and answers: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** Jesus responds by telling Peter that he’s truly blessed...That this has all been revealed to him by God the Father. That on him Jesus would build His church and that He would give Peter **“the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”** And then Jesus does something completely unexpected, He warned His disciples not to tell anyone who He was! What exactly, we may ask, is happening here? Well, what’s happening is that Jesus, His disciples having gotten the correct answer to His question of who He is, is now explaining to those same disciples what that means. But there’s a word found in verse 21 that seems to set Peter off, so much so that he takes Jesus aside and attempts to rebuke him. And that word is must. **I must** go to Jerusalem and suffer many things. **I must** be killed, and on the third day be raised to life. I think we can understand where Peter’s coming from in rebuking Jesus, can’t we? Wouldn’t we do what Peter did? Don’t we feel the same way? It makes no sense to Peter that the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, must suffer and die. It makes no sense to him that the one whom God promised of old, that one must suffer at the hands of the very people who should welcome Him with open arms. It makes no sense at all that his dear friend, a holy and righteous man, should be speaking of defeat, disgrace and death. And then on top of it say that it **MUST** be so?!? Does it make any more sense to us than it did to the disciples? Or do they just not want to hear something like this? Especially coming from Jesus? Either way, Jesus condemns all this by saying to Peter: **“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me...You do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men.”** He then turns to the others who’d stood there listening to this exchange, and says: **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it...“But whoever loses his life for me will find it...”**

This is all fine, but, here’s my question. After they, for once, get it right and after Jesus explains what it all means why have them keep silent? Why would Jesus do this? Why not tell others? Anyone else find this strange? Aren’t we **supposed** to tell people about Him? Don’t tell anyone? Wait a minute, Jesus...You’re the Messiah, The Christ, The Son of the Living God! Why can’t we say anything?? Why can’t we tell the whole world? Why can’t we shout it so that everyone knows it? Well, of course, **we** can, but the disciples were told **not** to...why? Well, because at the time, those waiting to hear this good news would, like Peter, also fail to understand and accept the Messiah’s message. The message concerning His life. The one that said: I must suffer. I must be killed. Think about it. I mean seriously, Do you really think that the Jews, a people who’ve been waiting centuries for their messiah, who’d expected a messiah in the mold of King David. A bold king. A brave warrior, sword in hand ready for pitched battle to smite the enemies of God and Israel. Someone to send those Romans back to Italy. Do you really think they’d believe that they’d had the wrong idea all these years? Let alone accept it? If Peter and the disciples, themselves Jews, are any indication, probably not! Most of the Jews had a pretty good idea of the type of savior they wanted and needed...Unfortunately, Jesus wasn’t it!

Aren't we like that sometimes? We hear what Jesus says about discipleship, what it means to follow Him, and what's our reaction? How do we respond? And be honest...We either don't understand it or we don't accept it. Why? Because it makes us uncomfortable. It doesn't fit with our concept of how faith is lived! Especially the part about denying ourselves, the part about taking up our cross and following Him. But that's exactly what we're to do.

Notice that Jesus says nothing about worshipping Him. I've said before that Jesus isn't interested in having fans, or admirers. It's not about merely having faith either. When the disciples asked for more faith, His response shocked them. He told them that they didn't need more than faith the size of mustard seed was enough! Last week we heard Jesus' remark about Peter having "little faith". Jesus repeats the phrase "you little faith" five times in Matthew. And while He doesn't say it here I'd say it's clear that this is what Peter is once again exhibiting. But as I said last week, "little faith" doesn't mean that there's any lack of faith. "Little" faith means immature faith. A faith that isn't fully formed. A faith that fails to fully comprehend what's required of it. A faith that fails to fully understand who this Jesus is and what it truly means to be His disciple. And, according to Jesus Himself, discipleship is about denying oneself and following Him which, unfortunately, involves picking up a cross at some point. More unfortunately still not everyone gets this. The problem is that we tend to think of taking up one's cross as carrying a burden. We think of it, as one dictionary defines it, as "an affliction that tries one's virtue, steadfastness, or patience". We must resist this.

Certainly, discipleship isn't easy. It is, in fact, hard. Jesus made it clear that loving God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength was no small thing. That it was by no means easy. Someone once said that: "Jesus promised His disciples three things, that they'd be: 1) entirely fearless, 2) absurdly happy, and 3) always in trouble." We're okay with one and two; it's three we have trouble with. And trouble we have already, we've got plenty of it thank you very much. We don't want more. No, what we want is a world **without** trouble, pain, or suffering. We want peace, plenty and happiness. We want a world where everyone gets along and we can have whatever we desire. That's more like it right? I mean, isn't that what messiahs are supposed to do? Make our troubles go away and make us better people? We wish.

But there's a reason why the symbol of our faith is a cross and not a crown. And the battlefield where our Lord wins His victory? It's not a physical place. It's the hearts and minds of people like you and me. Because it isn't about what we want, and guess what? If we don't change our hearts, what's inside us, **Nothing** changes. And one enemy, one problem, is easily replaced by another.

Think of the history of the Israelites. They didn't listen to the prophets either. Look what happened to them. Of course, for us Christians, for our church, our enemies may not be ones we can see but they're every bit as real, every bit as deadly as invading armies. The enemies are the powers and principalities of this world, the world's way of thinking and doing things. This is what Jesus was trying to tell Peter. He said, "**you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.**" But evil isn't overcome by evil, and a life truly worth living isn't found by clinging to the life that we have...and by life I'm referring to our incomplete/inadequate ways of doing, thinking and understanding things, especially faith. Rather, that life is found by letting go, by surrendering ourselves, our own selfish desires, our own feeble way of understanding things. It's found in following the one who leads us to a better way, a life beyond what we might believe possible.

Discipleship means deliberately choosing Jesus' way over our own. The earliest disciples took Jesus' notion of losing their lives literally, but the figurative sense is also true. Surrender and trust are the way of the disciple. The temptation to focus on material things is strong, especially when we don't have them. But we're told to **"seek first His kingdom...and all these things will be given to you as well."** It's amazing what people will gamble on. I mean I can understand, to some extent, the lottery, poker, slots, horses; but eternal life? Why would you gamble on that? Better question: why would you **not** bet on a sure thing in Jesus? Let me put it this way, Discipleship's not a more difficult path in Christianity. It's the **only** path. We either follow that path, Jesus' path, or we lose our way.

Yes Peter, Jesus must suffer and must die. Yes, that seems so very wrong. But didn't you also hear Him say **"and on the third day be raised?"** Or, thinking about the call of Moses in our first reading: God saying: yes, Moses, I want you to leave the contented life you've found here in Midian. I know you're wanted for murder. I know you don't speak well. I know you need help convincing people you've talked to Me, and persuading Pharaoh to let My people go. I know, Moses. that even though I AM WHO I AM, the God of your ancestors, has spoken to you, you don't want to go. I know all that, but haven't you heard Me? I've heard My people's cry. And I **am** going to lead them out of bondage and bring them to this very mountain to worship Me. If you only do as I ask! How many of us have had a similar exchange with God? One where His still, small voice was tugging at our hearts? Perhaps a response to an unspoken prayer calling us to do something? Maybe you were approached by the nominating committee...What did you say? How did you respond? **Did** we respond? Or just make excuses? Did we feel too much was being asked of us? Or that that particular cross was too much to bear? Did we tell ourselves that it wasn't really God speaking? Did we just not hear? Or were we simply not listening?

Most of know about Simon of Cyrene. He appears in all three synoptic gospels. He's the man the Roman's forced to carry Jesus' cross to Calvary. Simon, a foreigner (from Cyrene, now northern Libya), probably didn't know who the condemned man was. Mark's gospel describes him as a "passer-by". So, it seems unlikely that he witnessed the trial or had been part of the crowd gathered that day. He's just passing through town minding his own business, but nevertheless, he's forced to carry a cross! What must've been going through Simon's mind! Simon's experience with cross bearing and ours may be ostensibly very different. But it seems to me that our reactions aren't all that different, and should give us pause. A moment to reflect on how we carry our inevitable crosses.

The cross was unexpected for Simon, the cross is often unexpected for us, as well. Jesus couldn't refuse the cross and, ultimately, neither can we. And it's worth noting He didn't say: "make a cross" or "look for a cross". There's no need. Crosses will come our way. They will find us! Most of us know this, you need no reminder from me.

My question is this, and here's the thing, what do our crosses mean to us? How do we understand them? How do we bear them? Pain, grief, sorrow. These things are inevitable. We've likely borne these particular crosses more than once...maybe we are bearing one of them now. One glance at the prayer page would suggest lots of us are. But, how? How are we bearing them? Before answering that question, we must answer Jesus' question. The question He asks His disciples. The question He has asked His followers for almost 2,000 years. The question He asks us today. Who do we say He is? Not, who do others say He is? Who do we say He is?

My feeling is that we must answer carefully because if we, like Peter, say **“you are the Christ...The Son of the living God...”** If we acknowledge Him as such, if we do so knowing that He had to suffer and be killed, then I think that should change how we understand, how we accept and ultimately bear our own crosses. Why? Because along with the suffering and dying is resurrection. We know that “on the third day He [Jesus] was raised to life.” And we would be reminded, as Paul reminded the Colossians, that: **“As when [we] were buried with Him in baptism, [we] were also raised with Him.”** So, do we allow ourselves to be buckle under the weight of our crosses? Cursing God for burdening us with them? Or, do we see as part of the fabric of our lives? Seeking the Spirit’s help in helping us bear them?

Brothers and sisters, I want to be clear. These crosses we bear they are neither of God’s design or creation, but He has nevertheless enabled and strengthened us to carry them and they are the very making of us. They are the basis of the formation of a new identity. An identity that strengthens us to grapple with our reality. We can deal with it, one day at a time, and know victory by God’s provision of power. One that the world cannot possibly understand or accept. It is with this sense of God being with us that we pick up and carry our crosses, becoming more like Christ with each and every step!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.