

Rev. Luke C. Werre
Peace, Sun Prairie
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Pentecost 15

Matthew 16:21-26

LET'S FOLLOW CHRIST

What does it mean to follow Christ? Does it have to do with some sort of intuition about His presence with you? Does it mean using Christ as an example to follow –as in What-Would-Jesus-Do? Does it mean taking things as they come knowing Jesus is in control? What does it mean to follow Christ?

In the Gospel Lesson today Jesus tells us what it means to follow Him. Let's follow Christ with our cross, to the cross, under the cross.

Last week we heard Jesus congratulating Peter for stating correctly, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Jesus announced that the Church will be built on Himself, the Christ. Not even the gates of hell can stand up against it. But now listen to this change in tone: *"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, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."*

This must have been both confusing and upsetting to the apostles. Even more so when they put two and two together: "If we are associated with Jesus, and Jesus predicts such a terrible outcome for himself, then what does that say for us?" Maybe that was on Peter's mind when we are told, *"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'"* At this moment Christ does not comfort his disciples. He confirms their worst fears: *"Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.' Then Jesus*

said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'"

What is a cross for? Dying! Being killed! Christ goes on, *"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."* Peter must have thought, "I was afraid of that!" To follow Christ we must take up our own cross. What did Christ carry a cross for? To die. We must die. I must die. Me. My wants. My perceived needs. My comforts and conveniences. My time. My space. My fun. What feels good or right to me. All of it must be killed. To have the life Christ will give me, my life has to be over. It means I smile and bless my spouse when he or she gets their way, but I don't. But this hurts because I don't want to die.

Adam and Eve were the first ones to insert the words "I" and "me" into our human vocabulary, as in "I need that fruit. That would serve me." Two little words that earned the damning anger of their Maker. An attitude that still lives defiantly in our hearts, that puts me first. Hearts that don't want to suffer, don't want to be denied, don't want to give up the pursuit of happiness. Mostly we don't bother ourselves with what Christ wants on an average day. Even when we do our hearts are full of misgivings or resentment.

The cross is a symbol of guilt. It was a tool for executing the condemned. Christ says you and I have one. He wants us to take ownership of it. You and I are condemned by the God who sees right through us. It's heavy. But let's follow Christ with our cross. Let's be condemned by God. Let's admit that He's right. Let's not try to save one shred of our own dignity or rights or our own life. We are guilty. That's what it means to follow Christ with our Christ.

But Christ was condemned too. Remember, He was on His way to Jerusalem. Told His disciples so. He was on His way to death – execution reserved for hopeless criminals. But His purpose in taking up the cross, or being taken up on the cross, was to be condemned in place of you and me. Christ was condemned not only by some jealous religious leaders or some mistaken governor. He was condemned by His heavenly Father. Christ truly gave up

His life so that you and I could have a new life. The disciples largely missed it, but Christ did say that after three days He would rise again. Christ once said, “Because I live, you also will live.”

This is what it means to follow Christ to the cross. Let’s take the heavy, stressful, blood-pressure-raising, health-destroying, soul-damning burden of our guilt and drop it at the foot of Christ’s cross and leave it there. Christ has paid for it, erased it, deleted it, obliterated every last ounce of our guilt by His sufferings and death on the cross. Believe that because of Jesus you now stand before God innocent and holy –light as a feather and free of doom.

God brings you to Christ’s cross at your baptism –washing all your sins away. God brings you to Christ’s cross in the Lord’s Supper where you receive on your own tongue the hard evidence that your guilt has disappeared –Christ’s own body and blood that hung on the cross. And when Christ gives us forgiveness, He is also giving us life and salvation.

Following Christ means trusting that because of His death on the cross God has taken our guilt away and has given us a new life. Let’s follow Christ to the cross. But then let’s not walk away from it, only to return once in a while. Let’s stay there. Let’s follow Christ under the cross.

Let’s keep living under His grace, living the new life He has given us. Now that Christ has given us Himself for our salvation, we have everything we could need. Without any risk of losing anything, we can truly sacrifice our lives for others here on earth as Christ sacrificed Himself for us. To say, “Now I’ve got to do something for myself” is to walk away from Christ and lose our salvation. Christ Himself said, *“What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”*

Nothing is to be gained by trying to preserve ourselves here on earth. When we do, let’s confess it and then look to the cross of Christ in Word and Sacrament for forgiveness. Let’s continue to find the strength, comfort, joy, freedom, will, and perseverance we

need to live our new life, a god-pleasing life with Christ, by returning again and again for His forgiveness in Word and Sacrament. Even when we have to suffer whether because of our own sin or because of the sinful world we are assured by our baptism that our walk will be the same as Christ’s –a cross of suffering now but unblemished, unfading glory when Christ returns. That is what it means to follow Christ under the cross.

So following Christ is not a set of rules. It is not a how-to method. It is not a feeling. Let’s follow Christ, first of all, with our cross by confessing to Him our guilt. Let’s follow Christ to the cross by hearing His forgiveness and receiving it with believing hearts. Let’s follow Christ under the cross by living the new life, a life of selfless service under His mercy.