

Sermon on Matthew 16:21-26

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St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church, New Ulm, Minnesota

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Matthew 16:21-26 - 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?"

It is a difficult part of the job for a person in uniform. Movies have depicted it. Some of you yourselves have experienced it first hand – the duty of informing family members that their loved one has been killed whether in a car accident, war or other. At Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary I remember our Pastoral Theology Professor who had served at a large congregation on the WI/MN border talking to us about what Scriptures he used with families, what comforts from God's Word to share at the news of death, but then he said something that surprised me – "Remember to say to them that their loved one is "dead."” Seems strange.

When an expert doctor has to inform a patient that what they have is terminal it has to be made clear just how terminal it is - terminal. Why is that? It's because we don't want to believe it – death and dying. "It's not the way it's supposed to go!" is all our minds can tell us, and we don't want to accept the reality. "There has to be another way!" "Not me! Not you! Not my loved one!" In grief we deny the truth or try to bargain our way out. God has to get us out of our mentality and to turn from self (our thoughts and expectations, our way, our plan) and turn to God and his thoughts, his way, his plans. Only God can do this. What is God's plan?

First the Cross, then the Crown!

"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!" Peter meant this and later backed up his statement with a

sword. Peter, with his own two eyes, had just seen Jesus perform incredible miracles – the feeding of the 5000, walking on water, letting Peter walk on water, the feeding of the 4000, and his amazing teachings. Peter had been able to confess boldly and honestly – *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* Everything seemed to be falling into place, and now all he hears Jesus say is that everything is going to fall apart. Jesus, the Messiah, is going to suffer and not take his throne in Jerusalem. Jesus, the Messiah, is going to be persecuted bodily and spiritually by the Jewish leaders who should have been kissing his feet and saying, *“Hallelujah!”* Jesus was going to be killed?!?! And what does *3rd day raised to life* mean?

Peter took Jesus aside, as all of us would have, *“Never Lord!” “This shall never happen to you!”* You are true God in the flesh. You are better than this. You have power to stop this. Not suffering! Only praise and a crown and putting down enemies once and for all! Your kingdom awaits, Lord - dirt, strong walls and stones, a beautiful temple, a physical throne – all right in Jerusalem! Stop this nonsense. Denial. This was Peter’s plan and idea, and maybe a little bit of yours and mine too.

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.” Jesus had said these very words to Satan himself in the wilderness as he was being tempted by offers of an easy road to his goal, just a slight deviation from God’s plan for him, *“Get behind me, Satan!”(3:10)*. Jesus stuck to God’s plan and told Satan to leave him then. Peter said what he thought was right and good, but he showed that even after a great confession the best of our intentions may have damnable conclusions. Jesus saw through it and saw the devil, the world and that sinful nature inside Peter rising up to make another attack. Jesus would not hear of it. He faced Peter and told him so. *“Your concern is from sinful human motives and thinking, not the plans of God.”* If Jesus had listened to the devil’s offer of all the kingdoms without the suffering, food that fills for a time in place of the Word which fills the soul for eternity, or testing God rather than trusting his plan and promises, and here Peter’s denial of the cross, then the trap would spring shut over him and us and we would be lost for all eternity. But Jesus didn’t dally with the devil, but turned away from him and turned him away with the Word of God – by the way - which is what we also can learn to do with temptation in our lives - Turn away and turn the devil away with God’s Word!

Then Jesus said to his disciples, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny himself and take up their cross and follow me.”* 1) *“Deny yourself”* – not talking about passing on desert or living ascetically. Reject yourself as your savior and human reason as your guiding principle. Reason is a gift we have – a good servant, a horrible master. Look only to Jesus and his merit, his cross and empty tomb. Look to his Word for the way things should be done – not your sinful mind and heart or the devil’s deals. 2)

“Take up your cross” – realize that to trust in Jesus for salvation eternally, for this life and for help each day will bring some heat from others, from friends and co-workers, from professors or teachers – who do not want to hear about a Savior, because they don’t think they need one. Not everything you suffer is because you are a Christian, but when you do suffer –realize the battle to quit looking to yourself and to look to Christ and only him. 3) *“Follow Jesus.”* Hold on to his promises like a drowning person grabbing a life preserver in a storm. Follow his Word like a highlighted sentence amidst a sea of text. Brave like Bartholomew who would not deny his faith no matter what the threat or the offer. In the stained glass window there is a knife as his feet. In the Sistine Chapel at the feet of God in heaven, Bartholomew is pictured alive and well holding his own body’s flesh in his hand. Follow Jesus.

“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?” Pawn Stars – I loved that show – partly because I’m a packrat, and partly because I hope to see something I also own brought onto the show that is worth thousands of dollars. I even visited there when I was in Vegas for a conference. Did not get to meet Chum-lee though. Every once in a while you see it come in on the show – somebody’s Super bowl ring or somebody’s lifetime achievement award that the owner sold to someone because the owner fell on hard times or wanted to feed an addiction and pawned their precious rewards for next to nothing. Let not your soul be seen in the devil’s pawn shop. Would you trade in your soul for the American dream of nice house, nice truck, nice camper or cabin, weekends away, etc. etc. but you have to let your time in God’s Word slip, your use of his Word and Sacraments go hungry and your faith fade?

Sometimes we get so addicted that we forget the deal. One of the signs of someone doing meth is they start losing weight. Appetite loss – they forget about eating, it becomes unimportant. So also the things of this world can become so important and addictive that we forget our soul is crying out for God, but we won’t feed ourselves with God’s Word. We forget about it. We hold onto the cheap trinkets and empty promises of a world that is passing away to find “happiness” and what the world holds up as “the life,” but lose our souls in the process.

What can anyone give in exchange for their soul? There is nothing in you, that you can do or earn, not even your net worth, or that you have by nature that can be given in exchange for your soul. But Jesus. But Jesus. After warning them of all that would happen, Jesus ascended the mount of transfiguration with Peter, James and John, and there they got to see Jesus in his glory – face shining like the sun, clothes like lightning. There was no doubt that Jesus is the Messiah promised throughout the Old Testament. There is no doubt that he is the Son of God, God in the flesh. And Jesus did not hesitate to give his life in exchange for your souls. Jesus told his disciples in

Matthew chapter 20 – *“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* Jesus willingly became the victim, the sacrifice to appease God’s rightful wrath over sin and sinners. Jesus died on that cross so that sinners, you and me, are forgiven. His blood cleanses us from all our sins. Jesus rose just as he said. The exchange was approved. Know your worth.

When Pompeii was enveloped by the surge of burning ash from the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius – people were caught, killed and buried in whatever place the surge found them. Sir Edward John Poynter painted a picture of the Roman soldier of Pompeii who did not abandon his post even though many were escaping through the city gate. He held the post; his commander had given him no permission to leave. And that faithfulness for an earthly commander. The disciples would have nothing to do with Jesus’ way or God’s plan until they saw what Jesus accomplished by his cross and empty tomb. And so for Jesus they carried their crosses. They suffered, were mocked and scourged, shipwrecked and put to death all to proclaim this message of Jesus, all to never forget or deny this message of Jesus. And so you and I carry the cross God has reserved for each one of us, and then through the merits of Jesus Christ – we receive the crown reserved for us in glory.

Realize what you are worth. Turn away from the world’s trades. Your soul is worth far more than the fire-bound things of this world. You are purchased by Jesus. *“Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him.”* Jesus has shown the way. We follow. **First the Cross, then the Crown.** Amen.