

Sermon on **Matthew 16:21-26** for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church - September 13, 2020 - Pastor N. Scharf

I grew up a city kid and I can still remember the shock I felt when someone let it slip what manure is: animal poop. We had driven by farms as we went to visit grandma and grandpa. We had passed by farmers spreading it on their fields and the smell. But I was dumbfounded when I found out what it was AND how important it is! Farmers store it up in big tanks under their barns and then a machine sucks it up and plows it right into the field. It seems so strange, but it's essential for crops to grow. What Jesus speaks about today seems even more strange, even outrageous, but it was absolutely necessary for our salvation, and essential for us to grow.

Lose your life to find it in Christ.

The disciple Matthew recorded for us, *"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."* How strange! The disciples had just come to realize with certainty who Jesus truly is – the Son of God and the Son of Man. Their rabbi, their teacher, is the Messiah. God promised his people throughout the Old Testament that Messiah would come to restore Israel, to bring freedom for the captives, to rule in his kingdom! To think that the leaders of Israel and the best Old Testament scholars would be the ones to cause Messiah to suffer was inconceivable. Jerusalem should be the seat of his throne, not the place of his death. And what did he mean by "be raised to life." No one can raise themselves. Peter had to say something!

"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus was never wrong, and he always had people's best interests in mind, but it didn't stop people from giving him their advice. Jesus says that instead of a throne in Jerusalem he's going to suffer and die at the hands of the leaders of the Jews. Peter's advice about suffering? *"Never."* If Jesus is true God in the flesh, and if Jesus is the truth and only helps people, if Jesus came to save the world, then *"Never!"*

"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." Maybe it happened to you that your parent, teacher or boss heard you say something, and they turned their head or their whole body and looked right at you – you knew in that moment you should not have said it. Jesus turns right to Peter and confronts him, *"Get behind me, Satan!"* Jesus spoke the same words to the devil himself when the devil tempted Jesus to think first of his own flesh, to test God, and to worship the devil and his deals to get a kingdom rather than God's plan of suffering and the cross (Matthew 4). Jesus says the same words because Peter, with the most zealous love for Jesus and best of intentions was unwittingly making the same offer Satan did – save your own skin, test God, abandon God's plan for an easier looking trap. *"You are a stumbling block to me;"* Jesus told Peter. That's the stick with a string on it that holds up the crate hovering over a marshmallow or a carrot. When the bunny or mouse enters to get the marshmallow, the string pulls, the crate falls, and they are trapped. Except here, Jesus would be in that trap, and all of us would be in the trap with him.

Jesus told him, “*you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.*” Peter’s plan was not God’s plan. Peter didn’t want him to suffer and Peter didn’t want to suffer either. Jesus knew he had to lose his life so that you would have life now and eternally. Peter didn’t see how God’s plan could be any good. And sometimes we don’t either. Follow Jesus with Peter. Peter still didn’t want to give up his plan. Peter went up with Jesus on a mountaintop and saw Jesus transfigured – his face glowed with his holiness. Peter heard God the Father’s voice of approval. Peter saw Moses and Elijah there from heaven. He didn’t want it to end, but when the cloud lifted – there was only Jesus.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and people praised him as the Messiah, the Son of David, and praised, “Hosanna!” on Palm Sunday. But the cheers would soon turn to accusations and jeers in Jerusalem. Peter ate that last supper with Jesus and said he’d go to the death before he’d let anything happen to Jesus or deny him. Then they went out to the garden of Gethsemane. Peter drew his sword on a servant of the high priest as Jesus was arrested. Jesus healed the man. Peter fled. Peter still wanted his plan. Peter snuck in with John to the courtyard of the high priest. He tried to remain anonymous. That worked about as well as a German smelling of sauerkraut trying to blend in at a lutefisk dinner. The people knew Peter had been with Jesus. Peter denied knowing Jesus in three different conversations and the last one calling down curses on himself *if he knew the man*. And then Jesus turned and looked at Peter. The same word there as we have here. Peter would have to let go of his plan and learn God’s plan and that it’s good.

Jesus suffered and died on the cross in a great collapse of human justice, but in the most compelling display of divine justice. You see Jesus didn’t deserve to be on that cross suffering the pangs of hell, God’s wrath over sin, the guilt, the shame, the separation so much that Jesus cried out “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.*” You did. I did. Our sins separate us from God. But Jesus took our place. This was God’s plan so that God can be just when he judges you and declares you, “Forgiven,” “Justified,” “Righteous” for Jesus’ sake, because the punishment of your sin has been paid in full by Jesus. **Jesus lost his life so you would have life eternally.**

Jesus rose from the grave. He found Peter and the other disciples as they hid in fear and terror in a locked room. He showed them his hands and his side. He told them not to be afraid. He is alive. Their plan failed. God’s plan worked. They were forgiven. Nothing could separate them from Jesus and his love, not even suffering, not even death. They finally started to understand what Jesus had said earlier in his ministry.

“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?” In this world we will have trouble and sorrow. Some of that will come simply because we are Christians. Or even if it is common sorrow and suffering that comes regardless of religion, we may feel it more acutely because we are Christians and must bow our will and our plans to God’s timing and wisdom. Do we understand? Not always. You see, like Peter, the devil makes the same offers to us. The world and our sinful natures show us the good and pleasurable things of the world – godly and ungodly, but the means to attain them, the path to get them, to achieve them looks so easy and so painless with no strings attached just a little sin, but they all

do the same thing – lead us away from the one thing needful, our Savior Jesus and God’s plan for us. They bring more fear, suffering and trouble because we are farther away from our Savior and his love. The goal of sin is to separate us from God and his love.

The cross God asks us to carry is often the hurt or discomfort that I feel when I follow Jesus and God’s will and his plan for me at personal cost to myself whether physically, temporally, financially, emotionally, mentally or spiritually. Denying myself and my plan seems impossible. Many walk away from Jesus or shy away from sharing the truth or dismiss the truth. The fear of being on the outside of the “in” group whether at school, work or play, the fear or discomfort of realizing that I am wrong in some of the choices I’ve made in my life, or things I’ve felt so strongly about. The arrogance of thinking that my way is best, no fear, no regrets, as I plunge ahead down the wrong path and deny my sin staring me in the face all sound like Peter’s plan. Peter didn’t want to take up any crosses either, that is until Jesus picked up his, dragged it to a skull shaped hill, and laid down his life for Peter and for you and me. As Jesus hung on that cross he bore Peter’s fears, doubts, devilish advice, his sin and shame, his selfish plan, and his denials of Jesus. As Jesus hung on that cross he bore your sin, your fears, your shameful deeds, thoughts, and words, and he took the punishment and wrath of God, so that you are forgiven. And you don’t need to be afraid anymore. Heaven is your home because of Jesus. So we pick up our crosses and follow God’s plan.

God promises that everything, especially the crosses we pick up and carry as we deny ourselves, will work out for our good. *“whoever loses their life for me will find it.”* The smartest maintenance man I’ve ever met was a man named Mike. He would do strange things all the time around the campus I lived on for 12 years. One time he got up in a lift and started cutting down limbs in this grove of beautiful trees on the backside of the library science building. They were good looking branches of very full trees. I was concerned and wanted to know what he was doing. He was cutting off the excess branches that made the tree too full to withstand the rain and wind of the next Spring season. And you know what? All the trees made it through the storms and wind.

It hurts when God prunes us. When we find ourselves carrying a cross, it is downright awful. And the devil, the world and our flesh will tell us that it’s because God hates us, or because there is no God, or because God doesn’t care about us or know us, or he’s unjust. But we know the truth as Peter learned it. God allows difficulty, disease, disappointment, death, persecution in this life, the manure pushed deep into our soil. He sets a limit to them too. He retains control. These are some of the tools of the master gardener, the master maintenance man – the hoe, the pruning knife, the cutters. And he eventually sets them aside. God promises to work all things for the good of those who trust him, for you. Trust his plan. Trust him when the world mocks him. Follow him when others turn. Praise him though the pain. Why? Because he turned to Peter. Because he took away our sin. Because he came alive again and was raised to life. And he’s the one who gives us these crosses because he loves us – so we withstand the storms until he takes us home. **Lose your life to find it in Christ.** Amen.