

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalms 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

09/03/2023

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

21From that time on, [after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah,] Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 24Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? 27"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

The Gospel of our Lord

## Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

## Discipleship and Following Christ

Good morning! Today, we skip the usual stories and elaborate introductions. Instead, we jump right into the text. This is because Jesus' passion prediction, Peter's response, and Jesus' instruction on carrying the cross are essential to walking this life of faith we call Christianity. And spoiler alert, we, just like Peter, will ALWAYS struggle to understand and internalize it.

Since the beginning of July, we have basically been reading almost everything in the Gospel of Matthew, beginning with chapter 13. And if you were here last week, I talked about how Peter gets the answer right, and how he would get it very wrong this week. Last week Jesus asked the disciples *"But who do you say that I am?"* <sup>16</sup>*Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* <sup>17</sup>*And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."*<sup>1</sup> Our text today picks up right where last week's lesson ended. It also signals some sort of narrative shift. Our text today reads *"<sup>21</sup>From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."* It seems that for Jesus, the ability of the disciples to understand that he is the Messiah triggers this next step in their training. One scholar, Douglas R.A. Hare, sees these two texts connected so closely

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:15b-17 NRSV

that he sees them as a “hinge” story, critical to each other.<sup>2</sup> But it’s also VERY important because of what comes after this experience too. The very next event covered by the Gospel of Matthew is the Transfiguration. The Transfiguration of Jesus is a high feast day, you know, one of those fancy Sundays where everything is white. BUT we celebrate that day on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. And every year when I preach on Transfiguration Sunday I say that it can only be understood in light of what happens before it, which is the very same text we have today. The rollercoaster of highs and lows is one story then. We have the high of Peter’s confession last week, his misunderstanding today, and the majesty and mystery of the Transfiguration in the next chapter.

One of the interesting details is that Jesus has turned his attention to only the disciples for the next several chapters. No crowds really participate in the story. His focus is on preparing and instructing them for what will come after. Another scholar, Eugene Boring, writes that *“restricting the address to the disciples has the effect of focusing the instruction on the meaning of discipleship to those who are already within the community, those who have, like Peter, made the Christian confession but are still ‘thinking according to human standards rather than the divine revelation.’ These words are not an invitation to discipleship for outsiders, but reflection on the meaning of discipleship for those who have already responded to the call of Christ. The NRSV’s ‘if any want to become my followers’ is thus misleading for Matthew... There is is no word for*

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<sup>2</sup> Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 193.

*'become' [the word used] thelei makes following a matter of the will, of decision, but not the initial decision.*"<sup>3</sup>

So today the Word of God speaks to those of us who already call ourselves Christians. And so I think it's important for us to pay attention to Peter's struggle. He, like us, knows that Jesus is the Son of Man, the Messiah, and yet he still struggles in his faith and understanding. Here is a man that had spent every single day of the past several months or years with Jesus Christ, and yet he still struggled to understand. So why do we, who have none of Peter's benefits, think we can understand it so much more quickly? (This is why Lutherans don't wait until a child is older for a baptism so that they can "understand" what will happen, until they can make an informed confession of faith. It is the very nature of discipleship to ALWAYS be learning and growing in how we understand Jesus Christ. And so baptism is just the very first step in a long journey with God.)

One interesting literary detail is that last week we heard that Peter, which in Greek is *petros*, will become the rock, or in Greek, *petra*, of the whole church. But today he becomes a different type of stone. "*You are a stumbling block*" Jesus tells Peter, a *skandalon* in the Greek, which means a rock placed in front of a person on a path that causes them to trip.

Because for Peter, the disciples, and even for us today, the cross doesn't make any sense. It literally becomes a *skandalon* for us too. This is the first of three passion predictions in the Gospel of Matthew, and given the disciples' response after Jesus' arrest, beating, crucifixion, and rising from the dead, they were unable to put these points together. It's easy to read Peter's response to Jesus and criticize him, but would we really do any

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<sup>3</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 254.

better? We do the exact same thing, even after knowing that Jesus will rise from the tomb.

Eugene Boring, who I mentioned earlier, concludes his commentary on a given section of scripture with a series of reflections, and it is to a few of these that I think we can turn to in our attempt to focus on what we should take away from this story. Dr. Boring writes that:

**1.** *“The Christian life called for is not a reflection of... the egocentric culture, but its polar opposite. But neither is ... Jesus’ call for denying oneself to be understood as asceticism or self hate... Nor is the self-denial to which Jesus calls the opposite of self-fulfillment. Just giving up things will not make one Christian; it will only make one empty. What is difficult for our culture to understand... is an orientation of one’s life that is not focused on self at all.”*

**2.** *“This call to discipleship is based on faith in Christ and confidence in the future victory of God... That is, the life called for here is not based on a reasoned conclusion about how things are, ...but on faith that something has happened that makes everything different. To believe in Jesus as the Christ and to live accordingly means to reorient one’s life toward the good news that God has acted decisively and ultimately in Jesus, not that Jesus has some good advice on how to live.”*

**3.** *“This call to discipleship is a matter of confession... The word used to mean ‘confess’ (martyrion) also means ‘martyrdom, in the sense of witness. The giving of one’s life is presented as an act of testimony to a truth bigger than oneself. Its result may be literal martyrdom... but it may also mean the daily giving of oneself away in commitment to Christ.”*

**4.** *“This call to discipleship is a matter of community.”*<sup>4</sup> And I would add that we can’t do this alone. We need each other.

**5.** And finally, *“the meaning of discipleship is learned along the way.”*<sup>5</sup> This is where we end. But oddly, it is just another beginning. You will never understand all of what God is showing and teaching you, it’s God for God’s sake! But we learn here that this life is a true journey, one that is never finished. So we are called to not get comfortable, and neither are we called to give up and lose heart.

As St. Paul said: *“**23** but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, **24** but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. **25** For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”*<sup>6</sup> Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 256.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> I Corinthians 1:23-25 NRSV