

## “You Have No Idea How God Works”

Matthew 16: 21-28

Last week, the question we pondered was “Who do you say that I am”, meaning as people of faith, who do we proclaim Jesus as the Messiah to be in our lives and in our world. This week, as if last week’s question wasn’t complicated and hard enough to answer, this week, Matthew throws another faith curveball at us when he asks us, “What good will it do us as people of faith, as ones who proclaim Jesus as our Messiah, the Son of the Living God, what good will it do us if we gain the world but in the end, we lose our lives, we lose ourselves. In our reading today, Matthew invites us to spend a little time with the question, “If we gain the world, but lose what defines us as people of faith, in the end, what will we have really gained?”

To be honest, I know how I am supposed to answer this question but that doesn’t mean I like the answers. That’s why normally when this particular passage comes up on the lectionary reading, I usually try to skip over it. Because all of it is just too much for me, the angry Jesus, the whole get behind me Satan statement, the talk about the cross, the losing our lives to gain our lives, all of it is too much for me. It makes my head hurt. It makes me question why I signed up to follow Jesus in the first place. Reading this passage makes it all too complicated.

Sure I try to reason the complications away, saying things like Jesus couldn't have been serious when he started talking this way. He didn't mean it like it sounds. I say things like faith is supposed to be simple. The living out the gospel message through our words and actions is supposed to be easy. The whole being a follower of Jesus Christ is supposed to be, well...not complicated.

We all know that being a follower of Jesus Christ is all about loving others, treating others as we would want to be treated. We all know being a follower of Jesus Christ is about welcoming the stranger and tending to the forgotten in our midst. See what I mean about it not being complicated. Following Jesus, the Son of the Living God is easy except...when our loving others brings us face to face with people who don't look like us, people who don't think like us. Following Jesus, proclaiming the Kingdom of God in our midst is easy except when that whole welcoming the stranger puts us at cross purposes with the powers that be. Following Jesus, preaching love and grace is simple except when that whole caring for the least of these opens our eyes to the many, many injustices in our midst, injustices we can no longer ignore, injustices that we can no longer pretend do not exist anymore.

You see, why I always skip this passage. Because every time I read it, the Spirit reminds me that being a follower of Jesus, the Son of the Living God is easier said than done. Every time I read this text, the Spirit reminds me that if we

as people of faith, if we proclaim Jesus as the Son of the Living God, a Messiah of love and grace, a Messiah who turns things upside down, a Messiah who calls us to a different way of being, then we as his followers need to be ready to have our eyes opened to the brokenness and hurt right here in our midst. We need to be ready to understand that if we truly want the Kingdom of God to come to fruition here on earth, in no way, can we skip over the cross. If as followers of Jesus Christ, we proclaim him to be the Son of the Living God, and we don't understand the why behind his suffering and his death, then it is time to admit we have no idea how God really works.

I say this, because, let's be honest, any time we start saying we are the only ones with all the answers, God comes along and surprises us. God flips things upside down, inside out, and reminds us that just when we think our "theology and faith is tight, right, and infallible, [in reality] it just might be oppressive and death-dealing", forfeiting the very thing that defines us as followers of Jesus Christ...our connection to the welcoming love and grace that was shown to us when God first embraced us as God's beloved children.

Or let me say it this way....This week, amid all the news coverage about Hurricane Harvey, two stories came to light. The first story being how Joel Osteen and his church were called out on social media for not taking in people for shelter at their Lakewood Church campus. Love him or hate him, or even if you love to

hate him or hate to love him, no one wants that kind of PR for the wider church. It is hard enough in this culture to be a person of faith. For the most part, people have no use for organized religion. They say I'm spiritual but not religious. They say that they have been so hurt and burned by the Church that they would rather walk away from it all than be a part of its hypocrisy. In a time such as this, when people are already disillusioned by the church, we as the Body of Christ don't need to add to their shattered perceptions by not living out what defines us as followers of Jesus Christ. There is already enough brokenness in this world without us creating more.

So back to the story, as the week progressed, conflicting reports emerged about whether or not Joel Osteen's church really did keep its doors shut or if there was flooding that made the campus inaccessible. By the end of the week, the church opened its doors and a few people were allowed in for shelter and rest. But the damage was already done. There was a tidal wave of backlash against this particular church and Christianity in general. All of us, as followers of Jesus Christ, were lumped together as hypocrites, as caring only about our institutions while brokenness and hurt surround our very church doors. It was pointed out time and time again, how Christians had gained the whole world but have lost what defines us as followers of Jesus Christ.

Now let me say, I know that a lot of these comments were spoken in anger, were spoken in frustration, were spoken in desperation and that, in reality, a lot of people from all faiths, are working tirelessly to bring comfort to those in this time of need. But as I watched the story of Joel Osteen's church unfold, I could not help but feel convicted by these people's words. I cannot deny that there have been times in my life, and in faith journey, when I have turned the challenging message of sharing God's love and grace with others into a too sweet slogan that allows me to get out of jail without any complications. In watching this story unfold, I cannot deny there has been and continues to be a gap between what we practice and what we preach as followers of Jesus Christ. In watching this story unfold, I wondered if as ones who proclaim Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, I wondered if we have truly forgotten how God really works.

All these conversations were running through my head when the second incident occurred. It probably wasn't on many of our radars but as a minister, this incident was very much front and center for me. On Tuesday, a coalition of conservative evangelical ministers released a statement called the Nashville Statement, which basically said if you didn't agree with them, than you were not a "real" follower of Jesus Christ, claiming that they had this authority to do this based on the Church's tradition of gathering councils to decide pressing theological matters.

Okay, let me stop right there and say, first of all, when these Councils were gathered years ago, there was only one church. The Protestant Reformation hadn't happened. The Great Awakening hadn't happened. Everybody was part of the one church. Sure there were disagreements. That's why they held the councils. But it was one church.

Nowadays, there are so many different denominations and splits within the wider church, no one can claim to speak for the whole church, not even the Pope. So when a group claimed such authority, I couldn't help but see the irony that on the same week this statement was released, we as the Larger Body of Christ, the Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, the Protestant Church, any church who is reading the lectionary text this week, I couldn't help but noticed the irony that on the same week this statement was released, the text we were looking at scolds us as followers of Jesus Christ because we have set our minds on human things, not divine things. I wanted to point out this irony to the world but of course someone who is way smarter than me said it better when she shared, "The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love."

When these two incidents came to light, the incident surrounding Joel Osteen's church and the incident concerning the Nashville statement, it became very clear that the danger we find ourselves in us as Christians is that by listening to only part of what Jesus is saying when it comes to our calling, we have

unfortunately turned Jesus' radical message, a message which proclaims the world will be turned upside down, where the rich will be poor, and the poor will be rich, a message where justice will roll down like water, washing everything anew, unfortunately as followers of Jesus Christ, we have turned Jesus' life giving message into something that will barely make any waves when it is preached.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we've turned The Word Made Flesh who came to live among God's people to share grace and truth for all of God's children into a really nice guy who is sweet and gentle, into a guy who is good with children.

Unfortunately as followers of Jesus, we have left Christ out of the Christianity we practice. All because we heard what we wanted to hear and ignored the rest. All because we have forgotten what it truly means to be a disciple of Christ. As ones who proclaim Jesus to be the Son of the Living God, the very ones who understand the why behind his suffering and dying, unfortunately, we have forgotten how God really works, bring healing and wholeness to all of God's children.

Now, by no means, do I think I have all the answers and by no means do I think I am perfect in my faith. But...but I do wonder if maybe, just maybe, given what is going on in our world, the fighting, the brokenness, the hurt, the hate, I wonder if it isn't time for us as followers of Jesus Christ, to do a little soul-

searching as we ponder Matthew's questions for us, "Have we forgotten how God really works? Have we gained the world, but lost what defines us as people of faith? And if so, in the end, what will we have really gained?"

Like I said, I know how I am supposed to answer these questions but that doesn't mean the process of finding these answers won't be hard. However knowing the importance of our answers to these questions, maybe just maybe, in a time such as this, a time when everyone is so quick to say we as followers of Jesus Christ are hypocrites, in a time when people say we care for nothing but ourselves, maybe just maybe we as ones who proclaim a living Savior will have the courage and strength to show them a different answer. May it be so. Amen.