

## “Take Up the Cross”

Matthew 16: 21-28

I have always struggled with this particular passage. This is not the Jesus that I am used to at all. This Jesus is rough and abrasive. He has a short temper and seems to lash out against Peter. Sure, this isn't the first time this particular angry Jesus has appeared in the Gospel stories but it seems in those instances, it was always an outsider that Jesus was angry with, not his disciples. And now, we get a story where it seems that Jesus even gets angry and frustrated with his disciples. And that has never set well with me.

When I've preached this particular text in the past, I have always tried to make excuses for Jesus. I have said, “Jesus was only human. Maybe he was having a bad day” or I have said, “I'm sure like every great teacher or parent who sometimes gets so frustrated that they say things that they don't mean, Jesus had just reached his breaking point with his followers. He didn't mean to lash out like that and he tries to smooth things over with them”. But all of these reasons just didn't seem good enough to explain away Jesus' behavior in this passage. So I struggle with this passage and wonder what it means that Jesus gets angry at the people who are supposed to get it-get his mission, get his ministry, get his identity as the Messiah. It wasn't until while preparing for this sermon when I read an

article by a very wise commentator that I was able to name my struggles with this particular passage.

She said the key to this passage comes in the very first line, “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples...” and called our attention to what happens in the previous few verses when Jesus had just turned five loaves and two fish into a feast to feed five thousand. Previously, Jesus had walked on water and cured the sick. In the previous verses, Jesus had been preaching and teaching the crowds about the Kingdom of God. And then he turns to his disciples and asks “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter responds, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.”

And the very next part of the story is that Jesus began to show them that he must go to Jerusalem, undergo suffering and be killed. And on the third day be raised from the dead.

As the commentator was drawing our attention to this shift in the Scripture, she said that before this time, all Jesus did was tell his disciples about his true mission. All he did up to this point was tell them the Good News and now at this point in our story, Jesus is showing them what it means for him to be the Messiah. She said that this doesn't seem like such a huge point linguistically but in reality, this is a huge shift and a huge difference in Jesus' ministry and our calling as disciples because if Jesus only tells us about our calling on earth, we can ignore his

words or only hear what we want to hear, but when he shows us by dying on the cross, it is hard to ignore what he is asking us to do as his disciples.

It was at that moment that I realized that this was the key to my whole struggle with this passage and probably the key to most of our struggles with modern day Christianity. We as the Church have created and have shared a gospel message where we have only heard part of the good news, only heard part of our calling as disciples, have heard only part of what awaits us as disciples of Christ. We've ignored the reality that faces us and continues to face us when we live out our true calling with our whole being. Jesus is pretty clear in this passage. He lays it all out for us in black and white that being his disciple is not easy. That by following the true authentic Gospel message, we will make people angry. Jesus even tells us that we will lose our life when we agree to be his followers! I think if people really listened to what Jesus was saying in this passage, I'm not sure many would agree to follow Jesus. I know I would have some moment's of hesitation. Jesus knows this about us. That's why he is being so clear and honest about what awaits us. He doesn't want our excuses that we didn't know what we were getting into when we agreed to follow him. He doesn't want us to try and sway him from his path. He knows that there are easier ways but that's not the way God works. Jesus doesn't want us to say that when the time comes, we forgot like being disciple is a homework assignment that we forgot to turn in. Jesus knows that us

following our calling fully is more important than that. Jesus knows that our calling and mission is bigger than that. Jesus knows that there is more at stake than having a group of people following you around because you are some nice guy who says some interesting stuff. By showing us the way, Jesus wants us to open our eyes to the full understanding of what it means to be a disciple, to open our hearts to what it means to be a disciple, good and bad, because it is more than having a following. The Kingdom of God has come near for all of God's people and the good news that Jesus is trying to get us to realize and understand is that when we really listen to God's call for our lives and when we strive to become the people that God created us to be, there is something so much more than the life that we thought was meant for us!

When we pick up our cross and follow Jesus, we come face to face with the realization that the life we were clinging to is a life that was shaped by this world who says that success can be measured, a life that was shaped by this world who says that money can buy us happiness, a life that was shaped by the understanding that the lives we should be living are based on how far we can get ahead regardless of who we hurt along the way or step on to get ahead. This is the life that we are clinging to. This is why Peter tries to talk Jesus out of his plans. Just like us, Peter didn't want to lose his mirages of comfort and security given to him by this world. He didn't want to really face the truth that this life that the world promises him

didn't not fulfill him or make him happy. That's why he tried to take Jesus out of going to Jerusalem. He doesn't have the courage or the strength to open his eyes and really see what awaits his as disciples Christ. He didn't want to let go of this image of a Messiah who was powerful and mighty, who would come and get even with the powers that be, who would give special privileges to his followers for years of good service because that was how it was supposed to work.

That's why Jesus gets so frustrated with Peter. That's why Jesus gets so angry with the people who are supposed to understand and get it. They were thinking like this world thinks and not like how the Kingdom of God thinks and works. Jesus knows that there is so much more than what we are willing to settle for in our lives. So he challenges us as his followers to realize that when we fully and completely embrace our call as his disciples, we will get so much more than we will ever lose, if we will only open our eyes to the true Gospel message that awaits, to the new life that has been promised to us, to the goodness of God's grace and mercy that is there waiting for us, if we would only listen and truly see what it means to be disciples of Christ in our lives because the blessing of this story is that Jesus doesn't walk away from his disciples at this point because they just don't get and he is frustrated with them because they are a lost cause. Jesus continues to show them the way. Jesus continues to guide them along the way. And most importantly, Jesus fulfills his promise to Peter, the one who doesn't get it, is the

rock upon whom the Church is built, the rock that has its imperfections, the rock that was impulsive, the rock that sometimes didn't fully get it is the rock upon which the church is built, because in the end, Peter finally understood what it meant to be a disciples when he gave up his life for the sake of the gospel message.

the good news is that when we fully embrace our calling, we will begin to understand and experience that we get so much more than we lose. Sure it will not be easy. Sure we will be called to go places that are unknown. Sure, we may find ourselves having to take some unpopular stands because we believe and hold firm that the Gospel that we are called to proclaim, the Gospel of grace, the Gospel of peace, the Gospel of new life is available for all of God's children, regardless of the boundaries and exclusions that this world tries to apply.

Jesus is pretty clear about that when he calls us to take up our crosses. He wants to challenge us to look beyond the suffering that awaits us and see the new life that is available for us, a new life this so much more than the life we will lose. Jesus wants us to really think about the opportunities that we will miss out on if and when we don't fully embrace what it means to be a disciple of Christ. We could gain the whole world with its promises of wealth and power but we would be empty and hollow because these things won't last. We are called to set our mind on divine things, not human things. We are called to follow the path that Jesus shows us, not the path this world promises. We are called to open our hearts to the grace

and mercy of God that will comfort us, that will strengthen us, that will give us courage when our paths get rocky, not close them off because we are afraid.

The danger that we find ourselves in as Christians is that by only listening to part of what Jesus is saying when it comes to our calling, we have unfortunately turned Jesus' radical message where the world will be turned up side down, where the rich will be poor, and the poor will be rich, where justice will roll down like water, washing everything anew, into a message that will barely make any waves when it is preached. 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 and who is good with children. We have left Christ out of the Christianity we practice. All because we only heard what we wanted to hear. All because we ignored what it truly means to be a disciple of Christ. All because we have turned Jesus into a nice guy that is great with children.

The good news for us today is that Jesus will not let us stay at this point or continue to preach this message because too much is at stake. The good news is that Jesus is continuing to walk with us and show us the way. Jesus is continuing to guide us along the way. Jesus is continuing to challenge us to fully embrace our call as disciples of Christ. All because there is so much more than what we are willing to settle for in our lives. What good will it do if we gain the whole world but in the end lose our lives?

May we have the strength and the courage to pick up our crosses and discover the answer to this question. Amen.