

SERMON FOR SEPTEMBER 3, 2023

TEXT: MATTHEW 16: 21-28

THEME: THE WAY OF THE CROSS

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. **22** And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." **23** But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." **24** Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. **25** For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. **26** For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? **27** For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. **28** Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

In the name of Jesus:

Yogi Berra was a hall of fame catcher for the New York Yankees, and Yogi was known for his yogi-isms. Yogi had so many that USA Today at one time listed 50 of his greatest sayings. You may have heard a few of them: It ain't over until it's over, a nickel ain't worth a dime anymore, and it's like deja vu all over again. But the one that I want to focus on today is probably one of his most famous sayings: When you come to a fork in the road, take it.

That is the situation before Jesus and His disciples in our text for today. There is a fork in the road, Jesus wants to go one way, His disciples, especially Peter wants Jesus to go another way. The way Jesus wants to go, the way that He is called to go, is revealed in what Jesus says. It is His purpose for coming to earth: “ From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” But Peter didn’t want Jesus to go to the cross and die, He wanted Jesus to bypass the cross, which is why Peter rebukes Jesus and says: ““Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”

We see here that there is a fork in the road for Jesus, and by the same token, a fork in the road for we who believe in Jesus and follow Jesus. There is the way of the cross, and opposite to that way is the way of glory.

Peter at that time wanted Jesus to go the way of glory. And why not? After all , Jesus came down from glory to save the world, and, after all, the disciples saw his glory. The disciples and others saw glimpses of Jesus’ glory in His miracles, His feeding of the multitudes, the healings, and in raising the dead to life. Peter and others saw the power of Jesus and concluded that Jesus came so that we who believe and follow Jesus can live life on Easy Street.

Peter concluded that Jesus could go another way for the salvation of the world. To go this road would mean Jesus wouldn't go to the cross to die for the sins of the world. Instead, salvation would be accomplished by other means, namely, that sinners would have to live a perfect life in God's sight in thought, word and deed.

The problem with this way of glory, though, is that no human being can earn God's favor or eternal salvation. Even though the good works of human beings appear good and pleasing in our sight, in God's eyes all of the things that humans do, including you and I, are sinful, they are like filthy rags in the sight of our holy God and Father. It is no wonder that Jesus tells Peter to "Get behind Me, Satan, you are a hindrance to Me, for you are thinking the things of man and not of God." For this is exactly what Satan desires, to lead Jesus and sinners lost in their sins away from the cross of Calvary, because in doing that then there would be no hope of salvation for any of us.

That is why Jesus chooses to go the way of the cross. The way of the cross a spade a spade, recognizing that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The way of the cross realizes that sinners are lost and condemned and enemies of God, without hope and on the road to Hell.

That is why God sent His Son Jesus from heaven, to enter this human sinful existence without sin to be our Savior. This is why Jesus said it was necessary: “that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” When Peter heard this, and quite frankly, when others hear of what Jesus was sent to do, it sounds so unnatural, it sounds evil, that God would designate His Son to be the sacrificial lamb to take upon Himself the sins of the world. But this is God’s will, it is the work of God. God’s works always seem unattractive, unappealing, and boring to the world. It is as the Apostle Paul says: “The message of the cross is foolishness to the world.” But to us who are saved, it is the wisdom and power of God.

It is no wonder, then, if you were to walk into a more modern church today that the cross is absent from the worship space. Sadly, some churches remove the cross from the sanctuary because they are fearful that the cross might send a negative message to worshippers.

But, in the words of an old hymn, “In the cross of Christ I glory, towering over the wrecks of time. All the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime.” The way of the cross is foolish to those who are perishing but to those who believe in Jesus it is the means by which God saves us, imparting

forgiveness and hope. To the world God's means of grace, His Holy Word, the Bible, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, are empty things devoid of power. But the Bible tells us that through these means God gives us faith, hope, and salvation. He speaks to us through His Word. He washes away our sins and makes us His children in Baptism. He feeds us with the Body and Blood of His Son for the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of our faith, so that we can be equipped to live as His children.

But how are we to live? By taking up the cross and following Jesus. And many times that means that we will go through times of suffering, not as punishment, but as God allowed opportunities to lean on Jesus, to grow in Him and to witness to others about Him.

The sign of the cross was placed upon you in your Baptism. In Baptism you have been marked as one who belongs to Christ. God calls you to remember your Baptism each and everyday of your life. To repent of your sins, to crucify the old, sinful nature, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you then live your life by the guiding of the Holy Spirit as He leads you on the way of the cross and the way of Christ. Led by the Spirit, in joyful times but also in times of suffering, to follow Jesus trusting in Him to lead and guide through the trials and temptations of life.

One of the early church fathers, a man named Origen described it this way. Origen suggested that when Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan," what he actually meant was, "Peter, your place is behind me, not in front of me. It's your job to follow me in the way I choose, not to try to lead me in the way YOU would like me to go."

You have been called in Baptism and you are now called a Christian, which is to be a little Christ. Christ invites you to follow Him in all you do throughout your life. The way of Christ, the way of the cross, means that you will put Christ first in all things. It will mean putting someone other than yourself first, being concerned not so much with what YOU want, but what God wants for you.

The cross now has become the constant signal to us of how God wants us to live and love today...as sacrificial servants. We are not called to be prima donnas... We are called to be servants. We are called to take up the mission of Christ... and to emulate the servant spirit of our Lord. Living by the power of the Spirit, living following Christ, living to share Christ with those around us.

To the glory of God and in Jesus name.

Amen