



THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

Christians Carry Crosses

Matthew 16:21-26 (NIV84)

²¹ 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, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

"It's my cross to bear." Have you ever heard or uttered that phrase? Being new to Utah, I'm not sure how popular a saying that is here. Generally, when I hear that phrase used, people are referring to specific trials and tribulations, certain hardships that they are undergoing. Their cross is something that they have to suffer through. But is that what Jesus meant when he said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"? (verse 24) Is carrying the cross just about enduring the rough stuff in life?

Our gospel reading today is a continuation of the verses we heard last week where Jesus told Peter that he, Jesus, would build his church on that confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus ended the section talking about giving his disciples the keys of heaven telling them that when they forgive sins here on earth, they are forgiven in heaven, and when they do not forgive sins on earth, they are not forgiven in heaven. The next thing we hear Jesus doing is explaining to the disciples how exactly this forgiveness will be for the world, how the disciples will be able to forgive and not forgive sins. It all rests on Jesus being the Christ, to do what he was chosen to do.

"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, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (verse 21) How much did Jesus reveal to them ahead of time? Did Jesus mention the crown of thorns? Did he talk about the abusive and blasphemous insults, the spit that would be hurled upon him? Did he talk about the scourging that would take place as chunks of his back would be ripped out? Did he describe the future pain of the nails being driven through his hands and feet? Did he go through the process of what happens to the body in crucifixion, how the person slowly asphyxiates as they are unable to pull themselves up for more oxygen? Did he tell them about the cross?

No matter what details Jesus gave, it is clear that he is willingly and actively going to Jerusalem to go through these very things. Why? Because this is where forgiveness comes from – his sacrifice, his journey up to and including the cross. This is what it means that he is the Christ, that he will sacrifice his life to crush Satan's head to forgive the sins of all people.

Upon such a gruesome explanation, Peter jumps in. "[He] took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'" (verse 22) Peter doesn't want a dead Christ; he wants a living one. May God spare you from such a tragedy, Jesus! We need you here with us! Say you won't die.

"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." (verse 23) Wow. Jesus' response hits like ton of bricks. Peter was quick to believe, but he hadn't let the whole picture sink in. The cross had to happen for Jesus if any sins were to be forgiven. This is the plan that had been built up by all the Old Testament sacrifices, by the prophecies of a suffering Messiah, someone who would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. whose wounds would heal us. To skip the cross would be to skip Jesus' complete and total payment for our sins.

Peter reviled the idea of Jesus going to and carrying the cross. But Jesus tells him that Peter has in mind the things of men, not the things of God. Jesus' death means life – not just for him, but for his followers as well. Jesus tells us that God has it in mind that not just he would carry the cross. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (verse 24)

The cross is not something so small that it is only a symbol of enduring suffering. That's how many people treat it, but that is having in mind the things of men, not the things of God. The cross means death. It is a symbol of execution, the preferred method of the Roman Empire. It is akin of wearing a sign or title like the inmates on death row. "Dead man walking," the guards say. To take up your cross means someone is about to die.

Who should die? It's actually us. Now, I don't mean that we should pull some cultish move, drink a bunch of magic Lutheran kool-aid, and die. No, the person who must die is the one devoid of having in mind the things of God. To say it another way, the person who is supposed to die on the cross as Jesus tells us is our sinful nature.

Think about some of your more recent struggles to obey God's commands. That moment when an idea pops into your head. You know that you should immediately dismiss it, but you entertain it. You think about the pros and cons. What would really be so bad if I did this? But there is voice crying out inside your head, "Don't do it!" But it seems so good and so harmless. In fact, there's a promise of pleasure, a payoff. The voice is still there, but it's wearing out its cry, "Don't do it!" Will you deny yourself, deny your sinful nature which is trying to get you to disobey God, or will you go with it? Will you follow the things in your mind that are of God or the things that are of men?

What Jesus is telling us is that anyone who follows him must first put to death his or her sinful nature. Admittedly, we don't always want to do that. We are not the experts of self-denial. We don't want to fight all the time with ourselves and those conflicting urges. I don't want to have to painfully tell myself "no" when it comes to things I like to do instead of doing what God wants me to do. We want the pleasure. When we do not deny our sinful nature, we are trying to save our own lives, as Jesus said. When we do this, we ultimately lose.

How can we deny ourselves and carry our cross to crucify our sinful flesh? We know that if it's left up to us, then we are never going to be able to make that journey. Instead, our gracious Lord takes our hand and leads us to do this very thing. The crucifixion of our sinful nature came at our baptisms. Luther put it well in his explanation of the daily significance of baptism. He says, "Baptism means that the old Adam in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." He derived this explanation from what Paul wrote in Romans chapter 6 verse 4, "We were...buried with [Christ] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

By virtue of this new spiritual life that God gave us in our baptisms, every day we can deny that sinful nature, that Old Adam in us. When those voices work on us to convince us that the pleasure outweighs the guilt, outweighs the negative consequences, that we should ignore God's Word for our lives, we strike back, knowing that God has drowned our Old Adam, our sinful nature, in the waters of our baptisms. Our sinful nature is not in control. He is not me. He is not my life. I am raised by Jesus Christ into a new life, this Christian life, one where he empowers me to deny this sinful nature, that when I am tempted, by Christ living in me I deny my sinful self and resist temptation. Our baptisms mean that God has already taken our sinful nature to the cross. It's dead. You have a new life in Christ to follow him

Christians carry crosses, around our necks, in our homes, in our churches. Sometimes we're criticized for this. People will say things like "Why do you wear a symbol of death around your neck?" or "Why do you focus on the great and painful tragedy of an innocent man being put to death so violently?" Our answer? The cross is a symbol of death – the death of our sins and our sinful nature. Because Christ went to the cross and shed his blood, gave his life for us, the cross means that I am not longer controlled by sin. Jesus won the victory for me when he cried out from his cross, "It is finished!" My sin was paid for. By my baptism, it was put to death by virtue of that cross. I carry this cross as a symbol of that victory over sin and over death, of the new life that Christ gave me through his cross.

The cross means death, but behind the cross is the empty tomb. Jesus himself said that he would go to the cross, but he also made it clear that he would be raised to life on the third day. We leave many of our crosses empty because we know that Christ did rise from the dead. His new life, his resurrection, means that there is life after death – even for us. In fact, this new life is our possession right now because we have died with Christ. Our sinful nature is done away with. Our sins are forgiven in heaven just as they are here on earth. This is why Christians carry crosses. Amen.