

THE CROSS

Matthew 16:21-28

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

September 3, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 16, verses 21 through 28. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 16, beginning at verse 21, we read in Jesus' name.

²¹ 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."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

This, to me, is one of the funniest passages in the Bible. It might not be ha-ha funny like a good dad joke. But, as you think about it, there's a certain humor to it. It's that real-life kind of humor.

If you remember from last week, Peter made a great confession of faith. Jesus asked the disciples who they say that he is. And Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16). It was a great confession, and it was Peter's finest moment up to this point. And notice who, exactly, Peter confessed Jesus to be: he is the Son of God. And, to be clear, that means that Jesus is also God. The son of anything is the same sort of being as the father. The son of a squirrel is a squirrel. The son of a human is a human. And the Son of God is God. To be the Son of God means that Jesus has the same nature as his Father. He is God, and he has also taken on human flesh. Now keep that in mind as we consider how Peter spoke to Jesus in this text.

"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" (16:21). Now comes the funny part. "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you'" (16:22). In one breath, Peter confesses that Jesus is God, and in the next he rebukes that God.

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Why? What could Jesus say that sounds so wrong that Peter refuses to believe it, even when he hears and sees it come right out of the mouth of God? What could sound so wrong that Peter would even dare to rebuke God? The cross. The cross is what sounds so wrong.

The cross still offends us too. We might not think about it much, because we see crosses everywhere, and we put them all over the place. We place them in our churches. We hang them in our homes. They're on hospitals, ambulances, and other logos. You might put a cross on your body. It might be hanging from a necklace, or you might even have a tattoo. We see them so often that we usually don't pay much attention to them. There's a baseball player who has a tattoo of a cross on his neck. And this one actually stands out to me, because it's so simple. It's just two straight lines, intersecting. In a world where everything is decorated, the simple thing stands out.

We see crosses all over the place. So they start to blend in with the environment. And, I suppose, that kind of numbs the offense of the cross. But when we stop to think about it, the cross is still just as difficult as ever. It offends us. God died. We don't really want a God that died. That seems too weak. And it's not just that God died, but that he had to die in order to save us. That's offensive, because it reveals our sin to be worse than we're willing to admit, even to ourselves. If God had to die in order to save me, what does that say about me? It's offensive.

The cross is also difficult because it becomes the shape of our life too. To be a Christian means that we take the cross as our own, not just as a logo to remind us what Jesus did, but it shapes our life. Suffering and shame becomes us. This is why you might hang a cross in your home or place one on your body. The cross isn't just for Jesus anymore; it's for all of us. So the symbol of the cross reminds us what God paid to purchase us as his own, and it marks the shape of our lives.

The cross is one of those things that makes Christianity different from every other religion of the world. We have a few things that make Christianity unique, and the cross is one of them. The world or devil, they would have us believe that all religions are essentially the same, that at the core, they're all just an expression of some kind of moral code. And if we do our best, if we follow the rules and treat other people nicely, then we can find our way to God. There's some kind of payoff. Maybe you get to go to heaven, if your religion believes in that. Or maybe you find some peace or wealth or meaning in this life, some kind of heaven on earth. But in every case, it's about doing what is required of us in order to gain a reward.

Now, certainly, Christianity does have a moral code. The basic expression is the Ten Commandments. God has expressed his will for how his creation should function. But the essence of Christianity is not about what God requires *us* to do. The essence of Christianity is about what *God* has done *for us*, and this is expressed in the most radical way possible. God became sin and died for us. And this is unique. In what other religion does God take such radical and humiliating measures to save his people?

Natural religion teaches us what *we* must do. But listen to what Jesus says is necessary: "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." One of the unique things about Christianity is that it's really all about what God has done for us.

The other unique thing about Christianity is the historicity of it. We're talking about real, historical events, specifically, Jesus' death and resurrection. Either he did those things, or he did not. If he did, everyone should believe in him. And if he didn't, nobody should.

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The proof of our faith is not in what some prophet claims God said to him. And the proof is not in how it makes us feel. The proof isn't even in the superiority of the moral code. I think the world would have us believe the best religion is the one with the best rules. But the problem is, we don't know who gets to decide which rules are best. We would probably just leave it up to popular opinion. But that means it would change whenever the values of the culture changes, which can happen rather quickly. One religion would be the best today, but in another generation it would be a different one, and after that it would be still another.

So the question isn't really, *Which religion is better?* The question is simply, *Is it true?* Was Jesus crucified on a Roman cross? And, especially, did he actually rise from the dead? Christianity is the only religion to stake everything on such a wild historical truth claim. Or at least the only one to stake everything on it and survive. Immediately after the resurrection, the apostles testified publicly that Jesus had risen from the dead, and not only them, but as many as five hundred other eyewitnesses said the same thing. This is not the sort of claim you make if you know it's not true, at least not if you want to be taken seriously. The only thing the elders and chief priests and scribes needed to do was produce the dead body of Jesus, and the apostles knew this. But they stuck to their story and told it to everyone who would listen. And when the Roman Empire threatened them with swords and crosses of their own, they chose to die rather than change their story. Many people from various different religions will die for what they believe, but nobody dies for something they know to be false.

So the issue isn't whether or not Christianity is better than other religions. The only issue is whether or not it's true. If it's not true, then you shouldn't even waste your time sitting through the rest of this. But if it is true, if Jesus did actually rise from the dead, if he did show himself to more than five hundred eyewitnesses, and if their testimony has, in fact, been passed down to us two thousand years later, then we ought to listen to Jesus when he tells us what is truly necessary.

And here's what Jesus says is necessary: the cross. His death was necessary.

If we were actually capable of doing what God has commanded, the cross would not be necessary. If we kept the One True God as our only God and worshipped him only, the crown of thorns would not have been necessary. It would not have been necessary for the blood of God to run from his forehead, down to his feet, and then soak into the earth beneath. If we had not made idols out of ourselves, it would not have been necessary for the Son of God to humiliate himself in order to save us.

In the First Commandment, God commands us to have no other gods before him. Now, it's easy to look at this and say, *Well, I haven't bowed down to any golden calves lately, and I'm in church now, so I think I've done pretty well with this one.* But there's a subtler kind of idolatry we commit day-by-day and moment-by-moment. It's simple selfishness. Who do I love more than anyone else? Who do I serve more than anyone else? It's myself. And this intense love of myself leads me to break the other commandments too, if I think I can get away with it. Or we keep the commandments for selfish reasons. Instead of love for God and love for our neighbors, we think we can gain something by obedience. No matter what I try to do, I'm always serving myself, and I can't stop. But then I might try to justify myself by saying, *Well, so what? Everyone else in the world does the exact same thing.* So maybe I'm not so different from the rest of the world. Maybe I'm not so different from you. Does that mean God should just let it go? Since the entire world is filled with idolaters, should God just give up on the First Commandment? Or does it mean that we all justly fall under God's condemnation? The rebellion

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of the entire human race against God's commandments has not succeeded in nullifying the commandments.

And this is why the cross was necessary. In his justice, God still condemns sin. But in his mercy, he bears that condemnation for us. This is what Jesus was doing on the cross. This is what he must do in order to be the Savior of the world.

But this is not what Peter and the other disciples expected from Jesus. They expected the Christ to reveal himself in glory and power. Perhaps a throne was in order, not the shame and humiliation of being executed like a common criminal. This did not sound like a very God-like or Christ-like thing to do, not to them anyway.

Peter's focus was on glory. The same could be said for the other disciples. Being the close, personal friends of God in human flesh seems like it could have its advantages. They were looking forward to a big payoff. But Jesus' focus was on the cross. Jesus insisted on walking straight into a fatal trap, filled with humiliation and shame and suffering. Sure, the resurrection is waiting on the other side. But he must get there through the cross.

And this sounds like a bad plan to the disciples. It's like they don't even hear the part about Jesus rising from the dead. And how could they? Naturally, they understand death to be a permanent thing. Even though they had seen Jesus raise people from the dead (9:18-26), they didn't expect Jesus to raise himself from the dead. Think about this: Jesus is the only person they know who can raise people from the dead, and if Jesus is dead, who's going to raise him? This whole "going to Jerusalem to die" thing sounds like a really bad idea. This is like when your friend says to you, "I bet I can jump over the Grand Canyon." You're not going to believe him, and you probably shouldn't. In fact, you should do the same thing Peter did. You should rebuke your friend and physically prevent him from jumping. So Peter tried to talk his friend out of what seems to be a really bad idea. Even though Jesus insists he will be raised from the dead, that just sounds like nonsense, so Peter doesn't even consider it.

But Jesus is God in human flesh. He knows what must be done, and he is willing to do it. In fact, he delights in it! "For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame, and is [now] seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).

But if it's difficult to accept a dying Savior, it's even more difficult to accept the cross as the shape of our life. Jesus goes on to say, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (16:24). Suffering and shame are not just for Jesus. They are for you, and me, and everyone who claims the cross of Christ.

There's a paradox to the Christian life. What does God require of us? The answer is, "Nothing and everything." What do you have to do to earn your salvation? Nothing. What do you have to do to merit God's love? Nothing. But, having been purchased by Christ's blood, we belong to him. He is our master, and we owe him our complete obedience, devotion, and love. This does not mean that you have to pay Jesus back. Sometimes we think that way, but it's not right. Maybe you've heard that little slogan, "Jesus died for you, are you living for him?" It's rather guilt inducing. But the big problem is that sounds like we have to pay Jesus back. That is not why Jesus purchased us. He purchased us with his blood because we needed it. And he calls us to take our crosses and follow him, because we need that too. He tells us to deny ourselves, because that is good. It is good for us, and it is especially good to those around us, whom we are called to love. If Jesus has demonstrated his love for us by dying for us, we should also trust that

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everything he teaches and everything he commands of us is good. Following him with everything we have is worth it. It's worth more than anything else we could do.

You have probably heard the motto, "Everything in moderation." It's often applied to food or drink, but also to activities and interests. It means, just don't get too extreme about anything. But I wonder, does that include moderation? We can become extreme in our moderation, which means that we never find anything worthy of our complete love and devotion. There are a few things in life that we should be extreme about. And Jesus is at the top of the list. Don't be a moderate Christian. That's just not the nature of Christianity. It's either true, in which case it's worth everything. Or it's false, in which case it's worth nothing. There's nothing moderate about the cross. Jesus didn't just die a little bit. And he does not call us to follow him just a little bit. This is worth everything.

The world is going to be hostile to Jesus. It always has been. If we are called by his name, and if we take the cross as our identity, we will receive the same kind of treatment Jesus did. Persecution comes and goes. It gets stronger and weaker in various places. But there's always at least a little bit of it, and it will probably increase again here. When we hear about persecution, or just the threat of it, we have two natural responses. Either we stand up and fight against it. That is, we try to protect our liberties. Or we passively submit to it. We let the world do what they're going to do, and we mind our own business and try to be left alone. These are our "fight or flight" responses. They're the natural options we consider. But God calls us to something different. He calls us to endure suffering. We do not make the people of the world our enemies. Nor do we accept the lies they believe. Instead, we speak the truth. If the world is convinced, great. But they probably won't be, and if they persecute us for the sake of Christ, and this includes everything God has spoken to us, so be it. We endure suffering as our Lord did. To share in that suffering is to share in his glory.

So consider the cross. And I don't mean a diamond studded ornament, or a tattoo, or a statue. I mean a blood-stained, rough piece of wood with the dead Son of God nailed to it. There, more than any other moment in history, that is where God has revealed himself to us.

At no other time has his justice been more clearly seen than that dark day when he condemned every last sin in the body of Jesus. And at no other time has his love been more clearly seen than that day when the selfless Son of God in human flesh bore the condemnation for those sins. The cross is the intersection of perfect justice and perfect love. And the result is our salvation. The result is a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The result is the gift of Christ's body and blood, here for us to eat and drink, again, for the forgiveness of sins.

Your Savior, Jesus Christ, did what was necessary. He went to the cross. There, he suffered the condemnation of your sin. He died. He was buried. And he rose from the dead. All that is necessary has been completed. This is God's gift to you. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.