

**The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**August 30, 2020**  
**Matthew 16:21-28**

***“Cross: Comfort or Challenge?”***

Without question, the cross is the central image of our Christian faith. We see it in various places in our Sanctuary: suspended above the altar, on paraments and vestments, in the Stations of the Cross, on the Seasons of the Church Year plaques. There are cross reminders all around us, and this is good. But let us never forget that the cross is not just decoration, a piece of jewelry, or an architectural feature. Originally, the cross was not just a symbol, but an actual device of torture and death. That hung over the heads of the first Christians as they lived out their faith. There was always the possibility that they, too, could end up like Jesus himself: hanging on a cross. Is it any wonder that the earliest sign or image for Christians was not the cross, but the shepherd (the Good Shepherd of John 10) or the fish (ΙΧΘΥΣ, “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior”). Over the centuries, we have sanitized and sterilized the cross. To a great degree, we are no longer offended or repulsed by it, at least not here in this country. We like the idea that the cross is something comforting, but when Jesus calls us to “lose” our lives by taking up the cross and following him? That doesn’t sound comforting at all. It sounds challenging – even disturbing. This is what’s before us today in the Gospel lesson as Jesus calls on us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. The message for today is entitled “Cross: Comfort or Challenge?” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

We’re living at a particular point in time when expectations are not being met. I hear lots of people say that they can’t wait until this year of 2020 is done and over. Why? Because life as we know it has been changed, and not to our liking, due to COVID-19. Parents with school-age children have been trying to balance the work-from-home thing with virtual learning for their kids – no easy task. This feels like the summer that wasn’t with all kinds of special trips, events, and vacations that had to be cancelled. Weddings have had to be postponed and funerals are very different from what we would like them to be. And for many, the new school year will continue to be online vs. in person. Our expectations for life as we know it have not matched reality this year. This is what’s going on in today’s Gospel lesson. After Peter’s bold confession that we heard last week, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”** (Matthew 16:16), we hear today of what the mission of the Christ, the Son of the living God, is going to look like. And it’s very different – polar opposite – of what any of the disciples thought it was going to be. Popular opinion held that when the Christ, the Messiah, came he would come as a military Messiah who would be a conquering hero, throw out all the despised foreigners who kept God’s people under their control, and restore Israel and Jerusalem to world power and glory. That’s not at all what Jesus says his mission will look like. What Jesus does say is that as the Christ, the Messiah, **“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”** (Matthew 16:21). You can almost hear that “clunk” as the disciples’ jaws drop to the floor as they hear this. Talk about expectations not being met!

This is the first of three predictions Jesus makes about his suffering, death, and resurrection (Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19). Each time Jesus announces what will take place, this is met by conflict, resistance, and misunderstanding from within the disciples as they box Jesus inside their own expectations. Do we do the same today? Absolutely! Jesus is *supposed* to be like this or do that, according to whatever most suits us on any given day. We try to fit the kingdom of heaven into some earthly realm. We try to fit Jesus into some political agenda. It doesn’t work. It’s not about fitting the kingdom of heaven or Jesus into our lives; it’s the other way around. It’s about fitting our lives into the kingdom of heaven that comes to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. The disciples don’t get this, and truth be told, we wouldn’t have gotten it, either, if we had been there. Peter balks at what Jesus has said and gives him what-for: **“Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you”**

(Matthew 16:22). And in that moment, Peter the rock on whose confession of faith Jesus said he would build his church (Matthew 16:18) becomes Peter the stumbling block, the hindrance, to Jesus and the kingdom of heaven.

This becomes a teachable moment for the disciples. Jesus explains to them – and to us – what it means to confess and follow him as the Christ, the Son of the living God. It's not about personal glory, earthly riches, power or control. You can gain the whole world, and yet forfeit your soul. As Jesus would bear his cross, so must his followers take up their own cross and follow him. It is about dying to self so that Christ might live in us and through us. It's not about my agenda, my plan, my timetable, it's about Christ's plan and purpose for my life. It is as Paul the apostle explains: **“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”** (Galatians 2:20). Because Jesus died for us, shedding his blood on the cross as payment for our sins, we are moved by his great sacrifice to offer our lives to him. But what does this taking up the cross, this losing our life, look like? It is not something that can be mandated or commanded; it can only be received in love active through faith. It is what Paul describes in today's Epistle lesson. **“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”** (Romans 12:9-21). The world may little notice or reward you for doing such things, but Jesus notices and he will reward those who have taken up their cross to follow him. **“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”** (Matthew 16:27). On that great and final day when heaven and earth shall pass away, our only hope is that we are clothed not with what we ourselves have done, but with what Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God, has done for us. All of the things that Paul describes as we take up our cross and follow Jesus flow out of what Jesus has done for us.

The cross of Christ is something that gives the believer enormous, untold comfort, knowing that Jesus has laid down his life for us on that cross. From that same cross comes the challenge for each one of us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus day by day, upheld and strengthened by him in our journey of faith from this life to life eternal. Amen.