

August 27, 2017: Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Matthew 16:21-28: Following Jesus

If you were not here last week...we missed you. Did you think I was going to say, "Shame on you?" I don't exactly have a perfect attendance record myself. If you were not here last week, or you dozed off, or you just weren't paying attention, I need to remind you of what the sermon was about, because this week's sermon is kind of like a sequel. Both of you who remember it, please bear with me.

The title of the sermon was "The Most Important Question." In life we will be asked many important questions, questions with answers that can carry with them major consequences. But the most important question we will ever have to answer is the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Everybody who has ever heard the name of Jesus has an answer, but only one is correct. Peter knew what it was, but only because God told him. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus responded by identifying Peter as the rock upon which he would build his church.

If you are here, presumably it is because you have answered the question the same way, or would like to. You're just not there yet. No matter how you answer that question, there are consequences. But we focused specifically on the consequences a person would experience if they answered the way Peter did.

You will be blessed, counted among those who have received God's gracious revelation. You will be blessed in that you will become part of the body of Christ, the Church, The community of believers. You are not alone in this. And you can be encouraged to know that thing you are now a part of, the Church is a divinely-ordained institution that no power of evil, even death itself, will ever be able to overcome.

But with that blessing comes responsibility.

We hold the keys to heaven. This does not mean we serve as judge and jury. That is God's responsibility. But we do have the responsibility of opening the gates of the kingdom for all who would enter in, especially those who have been excluded in the past. And included in this is the responsibility of telling people how to enter. And not often, but sometimes, we have to tell someone to leave, if their behavior or attitude threatens to harm the body.

We also have the job of binding and loosing. This means we serve as the moral compass for the world, declaring what God prohibits, and what God allows. Sometimes we use our words and speak the truth in love, but more than that we teach by example, by the way we live our lives, by the way we love God, and love one another. And people are watching us more than we might realize.

The blessing part is nice, but these responsibilities, not so much. This is a lot of pressure. It can all feel a little overwhelming and even uncomfortable. Maybe we don't consider ourselves a good example. Maybe we just don't like the weight of all this responsibility. Maybe we just don't like to put ourselves out there, being a leader, so to speak. We prefer to work behind the scenes. We think a person's religion ought to be a personal thing. But this is what we signed up for when we decided to follow Jesus. To be a light on the hill whose purpose is to lead people to God.

I don't think Peter was worried too much about all this. He was a natural-born leader. He liked to be up front and be the center of attention. He liked to be in charge and make the big decisions. He was a very confident person. When God called him a rock, the foundation upon which he would build his Church, it probably went straight to his head. But all that changes almost immediately here, when Jesus tells

him, and really the disciples, that the leaders he was calling them to be, if they didn't know how to follow.

After Peter gave the correct answer to Jesus' question, and Jesus declared he would be the foundation for the Church, and explained the blessings and responsibilities that entailed, Jesus did something kind of interesting. He told Peter and the Disciples to keep it all a secret, at least for the time being. We understand why when we look at our text for this morning. It was because as of yet they had no idea how Jesus would carry out his role as the Messiah. They really didn't understand what it meant to say he was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. After Jesus explained it to them, telling them about the suffering, and death, and so on, Peter rebuked him, pulled him aside, and proceeded to tell him how wrong he was. And Jesus responded by saying, "Get behind me, Satan."

It might sound kind of harsh at first, but not so much, when we consider the nature of their relationship. Jesus was Peter's Rabbi. Peter was Jesus' disciple. A disciple is, by definition, somehow who follows, someone who walks, stands, etc. literally behind their master. It was equally what Peter said as much as how he said it that Jesus had a problem with. Instead of standing behind, where a disciple belongs, he put himself beside Jesus, making himself an equal. When Jesus said, "Get behind me," he was reminding him of his place. And calling him Satan also made sense, as it was Satan who first tempted Jesus to take a different path to become the ruler of a different kingdom. That was essentially what Peter was doing.

In a matter of minutes Peter went from being a rock, the foundation of the Church, to being a stumbling block, or a stone that threatened to get underfoot and in Jesus' way as he was trying to accomplish his mission. The only way he could avoid that, and experience the blessings of being a part of the Church, and faithfully carry out these responsibilities he had been given, Peter, and the rest of the disciples, would need to stay behind Jesus and continue to follow him. And the following was about to prove far more difficult than it had up to this point. He was beginning his journey to the cross.

If you claim to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and you are not following him, you are a stumbling block. You are getting in the way. You are tripping up the people of God as they try to lead people to him. You are having a difficult time fulfilling the responsibilities you have been given. The answer is to not to just give up and stop believing. The answer is to start following. To get behind Jesus and let him lead you, as you lead others. And we are reminded here that following Jesus is not always easy.

One reason we find it so difficult is because it flies in the face of what we might think of as common sense, or we might say, "human nature." This is really what Jesus identified as Peter's primary problem. He was looking at things from a human point of view. But following Jesus would require him, and us, to look at things from God's point of view.

Jesus describes what this means through a series of contrasts...

Instead of seeking self-fulfillment, we are to embrace self-denial

This is the complete opposite of what our society tells us to do. Ask most people and they will tell you that life is all about experiencing all that our heart desires. You may have heard of a song by the rock band Queen called, "I Want it all." A few years ago it appeared on commercials for Dr. Pepper and Chase Credit Cards. The refrain was simple. It went like this, "I want it all, I want it all, and I want it

now.” It really describes the way many people feel, and explains so many of our country’s moral and economic problems.

What’s worse is that many Christian leaders are perverting the Gospel by proclaiming a message that is strikingly similar, saying that God wants you to have it all, to be happy all the time, and be successful, and so on. This completely disregards what Jesus is saying here about what it means to follow him. Our desires are sinful until God transforms our hearts. So we need to deny those desires for fame, popularity, power, wealth, and whatever else, if we want to follow Jesus.

Jesus summed up this call to self-denial in the call to take up our cross and follow him. A cross always leads to death, but not necessarily a physical death. It certainly did for Jesus, but for us it more often leads to a different kind of dying, a dying to our goals, our dreams, our wants, our desires, our control, our pride, or any number of things that can get between us and following Jesus.

I heard a preacher tell a true? story once about a man named Sam, and I want to share it with you because I think it does a great job illustrating what self-denial might look like for you...

Sam was the operator of a successful counseling business in a mid-sized industrial city in the southeast. He had contracts were with several major corporations in the area. The counseling center offered a variety of services, but most clients wanted help with a drinking problem. To encourage people to seek help, the center's contract with each corporation enabled employees to seek help with a guarantee of anonymity. Each employee's problems and progress were treated as completely confidential, and it was well known that client files were for the eyes of the counseling staff only.

One day the executive vice president of the largest firm under contract made an appointment to meet with Sam. More than one hundred employees of this company had utilized the services of the counseling center. The vice president arrived at the scheduled time, and to Sam's shock and amazement, he demanded to see the files for his employees. Sam told him politely but firmly that this was impossible. The files were completely confidential. The vice president's face became red, and he spoke loudly and harshly to Sam as he repeatedly insisted that the files about his employees be delivered to him immediately. Sam continued to refuse.

Finally, the vice president stood up and moved toward the door. As he touched the doorknob, he turned around, paused, and stared coldly at Sam. As he did so he informed him of his plans to instruct his legal department to contact Sam the very next day and terminate their contract. Then he gave him Sam one more chance. For a brief moment time seemed to stand still as Sam envisioned his counseling practice collapsing like a building demolished by explosives. He pictured his own personal finances also reduced to rubble. Then he addressed the executive in as measured a voice as he could muster.

"Dick, how many times do I have to tell you? It can't be done. It just can't be done. My center's work with your employees is completely confidential. Cancel the contract if you must, but you'll never get those files. Never!"

The vice president walked back and took his seat again. "Okay," he said, in a subdued voice. "If that's the way it is, then I guess it's safe to tell you why I came. I have a drinking problem, and I need your help."

Sam never could have known the real reason for the vice president’s demand. In that moment all he could see ahead was a path leading to a cross, to his death, at least financially speaking. But it was a

path he had to take, because he was a follower of Jesus Christ. It was Jesus who had taught him to be a person of integrity, to keep his word, especially to these clients who had trusted him with their deepest darkest secrets. It was Jesus who had taught him that loving other people meant putting them first, and not himself...And so he denied himself, he took up his cross, and followed Jesus.

As we journey with Christ we can expect to find ourselves, like Sam, at a crossroads from time to time, a clear and distinct moment where we must decide if we are going to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus, or if we will take the path that looks or feels best to us. And there may be several dramatic moments like that along the way where it seems like the whole world has come to a halt as it awaits our decision. But as we journey with Christ we can also expect to find ourselves in much more mundane and routine moments, deciding in small ways whether or not we are going to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus, or if we will instead seek to fulfill our wants, our desires...and these small decisions collectively are still every bit as important as the big ones.

Something else following Jesus means is this: Instead of trying to save our lives, we are to lose them

Like self-denial, this goes completely against what our society and our own body tells us, that we should preserve our life at all costs, even if it means shortening the lives of others. And not our physical lives, but all the things that we believe give our lives meaning. Each year Americans spend millions of dollars to add a few months to their lives, or to maintain a certain kind of lifestyle that they believe makes life worth living. The overwhelming message they are sending is that they think this life is all there is, and so they might as well make the most of it.

And again, there are plenty of Christian leaders whose message is consistent with this one. The pastor of one of the largest churches in America wrote a book entitled, "Your Best Life Now." But Jesus' message to his followers was the opposite. The best is yet to come. So don't hold on to this life so tightly that you miss out on living with him for eternity. But that can happen, if we are so afraid of dying, or of living without the things we believe give our life meaning, that it prevents us from living for God and serving him.

Key to all this is realizing our lives are not ours at all, they belong to the God who gave them. This is part of what Jesus was getting at when he asked the disciples, "And what can a person give in return for their life?" The answer is nothing. We cannot pay the price that is owed for our lives. But Jesus could. And Jesus did. He bought us for a great price. Only by following him can we receive the benefit of his sacrifice.

I know, it's a lot to take in. Something I need to point out to you is that Jesus didn't tell all this to his disciples up front. If he had, probably none of them would have said "yes" to his invitation. Neither would we. This is a hard pill to swallow. A perfect sermon for Labor Day Weekend, when only the faithful did not go out of town. I'm only kidding. How many people would get married, or have children, if they knew what they were signing up for. Probably far fewer. As I said last week, we often make some of the most important decisions in our life driven by emotion.

That's not necessarily a bad thing. I almost think God designed us to operate in that way. But we have to remain committed to our decisions in order to fully experience the lasting joy that can result from them. Great joy can come from a healthy marriage or from being a parent, but there is an even greater joy that is ours when we follow Jesus. But to really experience the fullness of that joy, we have to stay the course, and finish the race that has been set before us. By his grace, by the power of his Holy Spirit, we can see this thing to completion.