

14th Sunday after Pentecost A 03 September 2023
Matthew 16:21-28
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. Let's pray: ...

Have you ever wondered how Luther became so wise; so insightful, and so well-remembered? Throughout Europe, Luther is still well known and regarded as a person of major historical significance. One might think he emerged from a background of privilege or academic prowess to earn such acclaim. Neither is true. Just one word defines Luther's mentor: suffering. Everything valuable Luther learnt in life; he learnt through suffering. Luther's theology and life was driven by a "Theology of the Cross." Let's pray: ...

"That's not what I want to hear. I don't like what you're saying, pastor. Who wants to think about a life of suffering? There's a world of entertainment on offer out there. There are heaps of fun things to do. Look at how excited I get during footy season. I'm quite comfortable thank you very much. Who wants to dwell on suffering?"

Friends, it's tough to be a Christian today and strike a balance that we can cope with between the myriad things that compete for our attention, our money, our time, and maintaining our focus on the final victory of the resurrection to eternal life. Neither Luther nor Jesus spoke about suffering for suffering's sake. They want us to understand what suffering really is, why we suffer, and what lies in wait for those who faithfully endure to the end.

St Paul's wonderful insight into this is written in [Romans 8]:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience [:18,22-25].

What was that last word? "Patience." Suffering and patience are intimately intertwined. Saints, we suffer because we're dislocated from where we know we belong and we're impatient in our waiting to get there. And if we're honest with ourselves, it makes us uncomfortable thinking about what must happen to us in order to be there. So, in an endeavour to fill the gap of time and distract us from morbid thoughts, we design our own "happiness regimes" for want of a better descriptor.

We all have our happiness regimes. They're the illusions that distort our thinking and seeing. They're the delusions that we readily accept and refuse to scrutinise. We design our happiness regimes to ensure our survival and security, to give us esteem and affection, and to put us in control of our lives.

They're the means by which we try to protect ourselves and get what we want. Most of our happiness regimes focus on love, reputation, success, accomplishments, predictability, and getting our needs met. They're the trappings of "those who want to save their life" (Matthew 16:25).

Like many things we do, our happiness regimes work well until they don't, and they will fail. When they do, we come face-to-face with our own powerlessness. We recognise that we're not and never were in control. We realise that we're unable to save ourselves or anyone else.

These are the times when we suffer. And as preposterous as it may sound, these are the times when we must thank God, because suffering forces us to open our eyes, hearts, and minds to consider a new and different way to live.

If you need help with identifying your happiness regime, look for the places of fear in your life. The kind of fear that's gut-wrenching, the kind of fear that keeps you awake at night enveloped in darkness, the kind of fear that shadows you in the daytime. That fear is telling you that your happiness regime is being threatened.

Examine the places of anger. What really pushes your buttons and causes you to react in ways that you didn't think you had in you? Are there people with whom you seem to have the same arguments and the same conflicts over and over again? Again, your happiness regime is being challenged and is at risk.

Do you ever feel as though you're just out of sorts, all wound up, just not yourself? Somewhere in that, your happiness regime isn't working.

In all of these examples someone is messing with your happiness regimes. That's what Jesus is doing in today's gospel. He's messing with Peter's happiness regime. Jesus challenges all of our happiness regimes by telling us that the cross is the way to life, and most of us struggle with that.

"God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you," Peter says. We could easily add in parenthesis, "or to me." Peter is trying to protect his happiness regime. His mind is set "not on divine things but on human things." Peter wants Jesus to be a part of his happiness regime rather than accepting Jesus' plan for true and abundant life. I think we all do that.

In last week's gospel Peter confessed Jesus to be "the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Now Peter wants Jesus to conform to Peter's understanding of what that means. Don't we all try to cram God into the box of our own expectations and personal preferences? We believe, know, confess, pray, and then hope that Jesus will support and give success to our happiness regimes. That's neither who nor how "the Messiah, the Son of the living God," is.

Peter correctly named who Jesus is, but he clearly misunderstood the implication of what that name necessitates. To deny the way of the cross is to ask Jesus to leave us and the world unchanged. It means we're willing to settle for moments of fleeting happiness; whereas, Christ offers us infinitely more.

We can never really understand what it means to believe in, confess, or follow Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” until we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. The cross isn’t what we’d usually consider as a part of our happiness regime. It sure wasn’t in Peter’s plan. The cross stands as a sign of contradiction to our happiness regimes.

God doesn’t crush us beneath the burden of our cross. The burdens, difficulties, losses, and frustrations we encounter every day aren’t our cross. They’re just life. Taking up our cross isn’t the means by which we’re made good, acceptable, or lovable in God’s eyes. Nor is our cross, God’s punishment for our sins or his test of our faithfulness. Rather, our cross is the gift that transforms our sufferings in this world.

To deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ, means that we’re willing to exchange our happiness regimes for abundant life, and to forego “the sting of death” (1 Corinthians 15:56). That’s what Luther learnt and that’s what Jesus is teaching Peter and us.

Do we simply want to pursue happiness, or, do we really want to be transformed so that we may pursue what is good and acceptable and perfect to God (Romans 12:2)?

Let’s be wise like Luther and cash in our attempts to pursue happiness regimes in exchange for an abundant life. Let’s dare to be different. Let’s turn our faces to God, and rediscover the joy of our salvation and taste the promise of the eternal banquet waiting for us in heaven. Let’s live out with confidence, St Pauls’ encouragement to “all God’s beloved in [Elizabeth], who are called to be saints” (Romans 1:7): “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer” [12:12], and “may [the Lord] so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:13) to take you to your true, eternal home. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus, our resurrected Saviour. Amen.