

Pentecost 13A August 30 2020
Matthew 16:21-28
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* Let's pray:

If you spend any time studying people who've seriously impacted the course of human history - people like the early church fathers, John Huss, Martin and Katherine Luther, John Newton, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela – you'll learn that they didn't endure hardship for kicks. They'll teach you that all worthwhile human endeavour involves... "suffering."

That's probably not what you came here this morning expecting to hear. We mightn't like hearing it but it's the truth. It's the same truth Jesus speaks in today's gospel. Jesus doesn't talk about suffering for suffering's sake. He talks about the suffering that happens when our self-concocted and directed, "programmes for happiness" let us down.

We all have our own methods or routines, don't we? They're the illusions and delusions that distort our thinking and seeing. We design systems of behaviour to ensure our survival and security, to give us esteem and affection, to put us in power and control. Most of them focus on love, reputation, success, accomplishments, predictability, and getting our needs met. These are the emphases of "those who want to save their life."

Our programmes for happiness work fine... until they don't. At those times 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. On those days we suffer. There are many things that can tip us off-balance and show us that our programmes for happiness are vain:

- Look for the places of fear in your life. I don't mean just any fear. I'm talking about the kind of fear you feel in the pit of your stomach, the kind of fear that keeps you awake at night, enveloped in darkness, the kind of fear that stalks you in the daytime.

- Look for the places of anger. What are the things that push your buttons and cause you to react uncharacteristically? Are there some people with whom you seem to have the same arguments and the same conflicts over and over again?
- Do you ever feel as if you are just out of sorts, all wound up, and just not yourself?

In all of these examples someone is interfering with your desire for happiness and self-determination. That's what Jesus is doing in today's gospel. He's messing with Peter's programme for happiness. Jesus messes with all our programmes for happiness. He tells us the cross is the way to life, and that simply doesn't fit in with our happiness regimes.

"God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you," Peter says. And under our breath we mutter, "Or to me." Peter's trying to protect his happiness mind-set but his mind is set "not on divine things but on human things." Peter wants Jesus to be a part of his happiness programme rather than becoming a part of Jesus' programme for life.

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 do the same? We believe, repent, confess, pray, and then we expect Jesus to support our requests. That's neither who nor how "the Messiah, the Son of the living God," is.

We won't really understand what it means to follow Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God," until we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him.

Our problem is, the cross isn't usually a part of our schema for happiness. The cross is contradictory to the designs we organise for ourselves. The cross is central to suffering. That's an inescapable truth. Our task, therefore, is to make sense of suffering.

Here, Luther is most instructive.

Why? - 4 points

1. First, [God] 'wants to make us conformed to the image of his dear Son, Christ, so that we may become like him here in suffering and there in that life to come in honour and glory.' [1]

So, we suffer in this life to be like Jesus who suffered in this life. Being like him here in this life, we will be like him in the life to come, with honour and glory.

2. Second, 'even though God does not want to assault and torment us, the devil does, and he cannot abide the Word.' [2]

The devil wants us to suffer because of God's Word, but God teaches us that the Word is greater than the devil: 'Then our Lord God looks on for a while and puts us in a tight place, so that we may learn from our own experience that the small, weak, miserable Word is stronger than the devil and the gates of hell.' [3]

3. 'Thirdly, it is also highly necessary that we suffer not only that God may prove his honour, power, and strength against the devil, but also in order that when we are not in trouble and suffering this excellent treasure which we have may not merely make us sleepy and secure.' [4]

God gives suffering so that we won't get complacent, but always look to the treasure we have in Jesus and his eternal promises which will be ours forever—as Paul says, 'this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison' (2 Corinthians 4:17).

4. 'Lastly, Christian suffering is nobler and precious above all other human suffering because, since Christ himself suffered, he also hallowed the suffering of all his Christians.' [5]*

When Christians suffer, it's a suffering which Christ himself has made holy. In fact, Luther says, 'when they [non-Christians] run into affliction and suffering, they have nothing to comfort them, for they do not have the mighty promises and the confidence in God which Christians have. Therefore they cannot comfort themselves with the assurance that God will help them

to bear the affliction, much less can they count on it that he will turn their affliction and suffering to good.’ [6]

There’s special comfort in suffering for Christians. 1. Christ made our suffering holy 2. There is hope. Hope points to God’s work of conforming us to the image of Jesus. God’s work points to his own words and promises of overcoming the world and the devil. His work draws us to eternal hope. There is hope in who God is, as the Almighty One who loves us and cares for us. He is the God who proved his love and sent his Son to suffer and die for us. If he has done this, surely, in his love, he will do what is best for us in all things!

What to do - 3 points

1. Suffering invites expression.

Luther openly expressed his feelings of disappointment, disillusionment, depression or any other emotion that felt difficult. He saw suffering as a chance to express the Gospel. The word “lament” means to “show or express grief” and for Luther, Christian expression of grief allows the sufferer to identify with and point to Christ.

*“Christian suffering is nobler and precious above all other human sufferings because, since Christ himself suffered, he also hallowed the suffering of all his Christians.” **

The temptation for many Christians is to put on our “I’m okay mask.” We feel pressure to keep our emotions and feelings of grief contained and show everyone around us we’re fine. Luther teaches us there’s no need to spend all the mental energy it takes to keep that mask on. In Christ, we are free to express our “not okay-ness” in lament.

2. Suffering invites study.

Luther teaches us that tragedies and difficult circumstances can lead us back to God’s Word. Not because short and quick single-verse answers provide instant relief, but because the scriptures contain the vocabulary we require to lament. One third of the book of Psalms consists of psalms of lament.

“... the Psalter [Psalms] is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better.” – Martin Luther [See also Athanasius (c.296-373) bishop of Alexandria].

When suffering is intense and there are no words, the Word of God provides the language we need to literally pray God’s Word back to God.

3. Suffering invites song.

Hymns and songs have been used throughout history to cope with difficult situations and Martin Luther believed in the power of music to lift souls.

“My heart, which is so full to overflowing, has often been solaced and refreshed by music when sick and weary.” – Martin Luther.

Music can go where no other collection of words can. When the going gets tough, music can soothe the sufferer.

Dear Saints, to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ means that we are willing to let go of our self-created programmes for happiness. It means we are prepared to give up the mirage for reality. The limited for the unlimited. The human for the divine. It means we are willing to exchange our plans for God’s rich and abundant mysteries and live in hope. That’s what Jesus is teaching Peter and us about today. Do we just want to try to be happy, or do we really want to live? Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

[1] Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 51: Sermons I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 206.

[2] *ibid*, 206.

[3] *ibid*, 207.

[4] *ibid*, 207.

[5] *ibid*, 207.

[6] *ibid*, 201.
