

GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 14]
Sunday, August 28, 2005

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalm 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

GOSPEL SKILLS

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the opening phrase in our gospel reading, we hear, "From that time on." These words refer to Peter's confession of faith in Matthew 16:16: "Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." However, the implications of Jesus' messiahship were not self-evident. Jesus had to teach the disciples the full meaning of Peter's confession, and this was not something easily learned. The bible says it this way: "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering." This verse suggests that it took time for the disciples to absorb the hard and unsettling truth of what Jesus faced.

Peter acknowledges Jesus as the Christ but he fails to understand the full impact of what he believes. If Peter, the rock on whom the church is founded, has to grow into the knowledge and meaning of Jesus' messiahship, then we ought not to be surprised that the same is required of us. Peter thinks that Jesus was anointed to defeat enemies. Peter wants to share in the victory he anticipates Jesus will win. Peter is going to share in Jesus' victory, but it is not the kind of victory he anticipated when he first called Jesus God's messiah. It's a victory won not by killing enemies, but by forgiving them. It's a victory won on the cross, and Peter will share in it when he is ready to take up his cross and follow Jesus.

What does that mean to take up one's cross? It is clearly something that is important to Matthew, as he reports Jesus saying something very much like this twice: here in chapter 16, and earlier in chapter 10. One thing that taking up one's cross does not mean for most of us is that we are not to seek literal or figurative martyrdom for the confession of our faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus' death on the cross was full, perfect, and sufficient so that nobody has the right to demand bloodshed or suffering for sins or crimes. Pat Robertson was caught up in this kind of thinking this past week. So, for some of us, the hard part of cross-carrying is that we have to give up vengeance even when the cause is just, over against others whose cause is not just or honorable. For others, cross-carrying means that we need to stop punishing ourselves and acting like martyrs because of our faith in Christ Jesus. On the other hand, we need not assume that some people just have a "cross to bear" and leave it at that, without doing something out of our Christian faith to claim God's justice for all people. Cross bearing taking skills that are honed by the promise of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ centered in cross, death, and resurrection.

Paul writes in Romans 12 that we are to present ourselves as "living sacrifices," but that is very different from becoming a kind of living dead. God wants us to live as fully as joyously as we can. Paul writes, Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer."

When it comes to carrying ones cross it is important to notice that Jesus does not command us to "bear the cross." - like it was a burden. Jesus say, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." There is an enormous stress on freedom of decision. In addition, once we take up the cross then we do "follow" Jesus. We are not to stand or sit in a static position crushed by the weight of what we are holding up-the cross we bear. We are to move carrying our cross to be sure but more importantly, moving forward following Jesus. In addition, Jesus shows us that the outcome of carrying the cross is not suffering and death as it was for Jesus, but resurrection and life. This is the good news of the Gospel that we proclaim with all the skill that Jesus can give us.

So each day we have decisions to make when it comes to carrying the cross for Jesus Christ. These decisions are part of our everyday life as a Christian. More often than not, there are times when there is flat-out tension between our culture and following Jesus. So, important decisions need to be made. Tension comes out when some people advocate forgiveness of enemies and their death toll while at the same time a neighbor sees this as a slight to their son who is serving in Iraq. Tension comes in us when we give up needing to be right and we let someone else feel heard and understood even though we may not agree with him or her. Cross carrying comes in many shapes and sizes. It is a witness for Jesus Christ. It takes the skill of Gospel good news to accomplish well.

In answering God's call as people who bear the cross for Christ what if we did present ourselves as living sacrifices to God, not conformed to the world's expectations, but being transformed into Christ's image. I urge you to read again, when you get home those wonderful words of St. Paul in Romans 12, our second reading for today. Being transformed in Christ's image, we can live at peace even when we are in conflict with the society or the authorities of this world or even at times our friends and neighbors. We can live in peace because we are in the care of the Prince of peace. We do not have to prove to anyone, even ourselves, that we are worthy of love if we trust and believe that Jesus loves us without regard for deserving that love.

One thing for sure, in following Jesus and carrying the cross for Christ things will change. We will change, our relationships will change, and our worldview concerning people around us will change. Change means losing things, as they were but if we catch the vision of how God is redeeming the world through Jesus; we know our gain is of far greater value than the chains we lose. Peter along with the other disciples certainly discovered this wonderful truth of the Christina faith. Jesus continues to bring us out of the old ways relating that bring sorrow and death so that we can be free for new ways of relating to each other, and in the self-giving love, which Jesus calls us, we find real, deep, and eternal joy.

We close as we are called live each day, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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