

Sermon for Sunday, September 16, 2018 - “Deny Yourself and Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me”

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 16, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Marion Pruitt-Jefferson

First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-9; Second Reading: James 3:1-12; Gospel: Mark 8:27-38

I am having some serious trouble with the Jesus we see in this week’s gospel lesson. In a world filled with so much suffering and sorrow – so much hatred and fear, I want to hear about a Savior who offers comfort and hope. I want to see a loving Jesus who embraces children, who cures the sick, and who feeds the hungry. I want a righteous Jesus who brings justice oppressed, who sets the captive free, and who confronts the powers of evil. But I don’t get to choose the Jesus I want - instead, today, you and I get a Jesus who challenges his disciples and us, with a very hard lesson: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

This very hard teaching of Jesus – about self-denial and cross carrying – all starts with a simple question: Who do you say that I am? Not surprisingly it’s Peter who jumps in with at least seems to be the right answer: You are the Messiah. Which is followed by Jesus’ very strange reaction, when he sternly orders them not to tell anyone about him. That’s one of the themes of Mark’s gospel – Jesus repeatedly telling his disciples not to tell anyone about him. People who study this stuff call that the “Messianic Secret” and entire books have been written about what it might mean. I can’t say for sure, but I wonder if it’s possible that the reason Jesus doesn’t want his disciples telling people that he’s the Messiah is because they, along with every other 1st century Jew, seriously misunderstood what being the Messiah truly meant to be.

Of course, they THINK they understand – Peter especially. Which is why Peter’s declaration “You are the Messiah” is actually more a wrong answer than it is right one. What Peter and the Jewish people expected was a Messiah with royal blood – a descendent of David, who would rise up, and using the power of the sword, defeat the Roman overlords and restore the Jewish nation and Davidic Kingdom to its original glory. What they got in Jesus was a Messiah who avoided the centers of power, and instead chose to operate on the margins of society. A Messiah who did not identify himself with people of influence and wealth, but chose to identify himself with those who were considered to be outcasts and “sinners” – the sick, the weak, the widow, the orphan, the poor. A Messiah who did not come bearing the wrath of God to inflict punishment, but one who came in gentleness and peace. A Messiah whose followers were not battle hardened warriors, but instead included tax collectors, uneducated fishermen, and even women. What they got in Jesus was a Messiah whose throne was the cross, and whose victory was accomplished not by the power of the sword, but through suffering and dying for his friends.

With that vision of Messiahship in front of him, it's no wonder that Peter leapt to his feet and shouted NO Lord! You can't suffer and die. That can't happen to you. You are the Messiah – You're going to restore Israel to her glory days. You're the one who's going to Make Israel Great Again!

But Jesus vehemently rejects that pathway to power. Jesus did not come into the world to fulfill the nationalistic agenda of Israel, or any other nation - but to inaugurate God's vision for the human community which encompasses all people – and all creation.

Jesus' first sermon in the gospel of Mark is only one sentence and it goes like this: The time is fulfilled, the reign of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news. In that one sentence, Jesus announces a completely new vision of God's agenda for the world. The reign of God which Jesus proclaims transcends all nations – it has no borders, no boundaries, no walls with which to exclude the poor, or the refugee or the migrant. The reign of God does not rest on the power and might of the industrial military complex, but rests on the power of the cross – the power of suffering love. The reign of God is not sustained by economics of corporate capitalism and the fear of scarcity, but by the overflowing abundance God's good creation, where all are fed, housed, clothed and cared for.

We do not yet live fully under the gracious reign of God. But When Jesus asks us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him – I believe that he is asking us to live as though we do. To hold that vision before our eyes, and make the priorities of the reign of God our priorities. To let go of our misplaced trust in the power sword and flag and national identity, and instead to place our trust in the expansive, generous, welcoming, vision of the reign of God that includes all people from every race and nation and creed.

To deny yourself and follow Jesus means being willing to go where Jesus goes – to people and places we may not choose for ourselves. To the margins of society, to the prisons, the homeless shelters, the half-way houses and detention centers. To food pantries and soup kitchens. To nursing homes, hospitals and care facilities. To schools and neighborhoods that are under served and under resourced. Because that is where the crucified Lord leads.

When we gather here each week, we come not to worship a God of our own making, but the God made known to us is the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - a God whose ways in this world are not our ways – whose thoughts are not our thoughts. We worship a God whose power is revealed in suffering love which overcomes all the powers of death. We worship a God who is always more than we can imagine, more than we can hope for, or desire. We worship the God of the cross, who, through Jesus death and resurrection lavishly pours out upon us the gift of true life – life which never dies. A God who continually invites us to come to this table, where together, under the sign of the cross, we receive a small morsel of bread and taste of wine – Jesus body and blood given for us – a great and wondrous feast that fills us with all of the love and strength we need to follow Jesus from this place in to a world marked by suffering and despair. A world longing to receive from our lips a word of hope and promise, and from our hands, the care they need.

The hymn we are going to sing at the end of the service has long been a favorite of mine. I'm pretty sure that it's the only hymn in our worship book that includes the word "adventure." As we follow Jesus into the world today, may the words of this song be on our lips and in our hearts: Dear Lord Jesus, guide my way; faithful let me day by day follow where your steps are leading, find adventure, joys exceeding.