

Reflection for Fellowship@10

03.09. 2023

Text: Matthew 16:21-28

Title: Loving Your Life

Introduction

This morning I want to begin my reflection with a preamble.

We have a difficult passage this morning – Matthew 16:21-27.

There is a great chance that some of you might not like my reflection.

This passage is not for the faint hearted.

The passage from the Gospel according to Matthew contains one of Jesus' hardest sayings.

"Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

We prefer passages like *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"*, or *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

Those are comfy passages, safe passages, passages that provide some cushion some comfort in a sharp and often frightening world.

BUT *"deny themselves and take up their cross"*?

Who needs that, when it is hard enough just to get up in the morning and face the challenges of an ordinary day?

Let us pray...

May the words on my lips and the thoughts in our hearts be ever more acceptable to you, the Compassionate One. Amen

Do you remember last Sunday's Gospel reading?

The Gospel passage was Matthew 16:13-20.

Every now and then Jesus quizzes his disciples to see how much they are taking in, to see how well they have understood him. First, he asked: **"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"**

What were their answers? They replied, *"Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."* It's easy to repeat what others have said. Can you imagine how they looked when Jesus turns the question back to them: ¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. **"Who do you say I am?"**

The impetuous Peter was in the head of the class by giving the correct answer to Jesus' latest quiz: *"Who do people think I am?"* Peter scored a 100% for his perceptive answer: *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

But look how quickly the situation deteriorates and turns around for the worst.

When Jesus says that he will suffer and be killed, Peter speaks (unlike in Mark) and says:

"Mercy to you, Lord. Surely this will not happen to you."

The NRSV has **"God forbid it."** NIV has **"Never, Lord!"**

The word is *helios*, which means 'mercy'—more specifically, God's mercy.

Peter is calling for God to protect Jesus.

²³ *But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

Peter understood the scandalous nature of the cross and it repulsed him. There was no way Jesus was going to go to Jerusalem and be killed. I don't know about you but at one level we all can understand Peter's reaction.

In Mark, Jesus is specifically said to "rebuke" Peter. In Matthew, Jesus does not rebuke Peter. Instead, he simply "said" to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan."

The temptation to power and glory was Satan's idea in the first place (4:8). It was the last of three temptations in the wilderness. The temptation, we remember, was to assert divine privilege to make things come out well for Jesus. Jesus could be the benevolent dictator of the cosmos, which most of us would support.

Already in the 4th chapter of Matthew, the idea of avoiding suffering and the cross so that Jesus himself would be better off is associated with the 'satanic', which is why Jesus refers to Peter as Satan here.

He "must" (*dei*) go to Jerusalem (Matt. 16:21). This is a divine imperative, and he is not to be diverted by appeals on behalf of his personal safety.

Let me be clear, take up the struggles of your life, YES, but note as well, that Jesus never glorifies suffering simply for the sake of suffering.

We all know that life is tough enough as it is. Besides, buying in to that kind of logic is eminently a human way of thinking: *"If it takes suffering to be a great Christian, I'll be the champion sufferer of all time."* Suffering is not an achievement. There are crosses enough in life without making them on purpose. Human standards are about striving and achieving, becoming king of the hill, or having the most money or "building bigger barns" and "storing up my surplus". (Luke 12:17)

NOW one should resist making a moral judgment about this. The impulse to strive and achieve has at least some evolutionary advantage. The ones who did so tended to survive. That's one reason why a lot of what Jesus had to say went right over peoples' heads.

He talked to them about a different way, one that was not, it appeared, in one's social or financial interests, and one that was not, it was sure, in one's survival interests.

Who helps the poor? There's no advantage in that.

I think we need to pause and realize that maybe 'the way we've always done things' is not really life-giving. It took a real leap of faith and insight — then and (especially) now — for some of Jesus' ideas to even begin to sink in.

In human ways of thinking — the default survival mechanisms embedded in our ways of thinking and acting — the one who saves their life saves it. The one who gains the whole universe gains the whole dang universe, and everybody else has to figure out a way to get their own universe. The survival of the fittest.

The unholy trinity: I, ME & MYSELF.

Jesus completely upends all customary conceptions of gain and loss. True life is not in getting but in giving. Trying to save your life — looking out for yourself — is the path of destruction. The one who lives like Jesus — one who gives for others — will "receive" life.

Where's the benefit if you own everything, but have no life? For me following Jesus means learning to think the way he thinks, rather than the way we usually think. And that will be for us, as it was for Peter and his disciples, a life-long process of ups and downs, back and forth.

These words are as challenging for us today as they were for Peter and his companions.

They shake us out of our tendency to settle for a comfortable and conforming religion. They unmask our evasions, our double standards, our desire for *'cheap grace'* according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This is why in today's Gospel, when Jesus says that he is to be crucified and die, Peter exclaims, *"God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."*

When we approach life from a human perspective, we have only two choices: on the one hand is *carpe diem*, YOLO (You Only Live Once). Amass all the goods, all the experiences, all the happiness here and now, for that's all that you're going to get.

But then, there is the divine perspective, the Jesus way: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."*

The Jesus way is neither to eke every last drop of happiness from the world nor to retreat in horror from the good things of this life so that you can have them after you're dead. Instead, it is to give up on living for yourself entirely.

To live for ourselves is to imagine that we can buy joy for ourselves. We imagine that a perfect car, a perfect house, or a perfect vacation will transmute normal life into total perfection.

To live for ourselves is to imagine that we can seduce or marry joy, that we would be perfectly content if only the right partner were to come along.

To live for ourselves is to imagine that we can earn joy by working hard enough, becoming successful enough, popular enough, famous enough, but all of these are just illusions and dead ends. These are the carrots that life keeps dangling before us, which never provide true fulfillment, and the one who loves them, who loves her or his life, loses it in chasing after wind.

Counterintuitively, the Jesus' way is the one who takes up the cross of self-denial, who refuses to believe that revenge brings about closure, who rejects the idea that the one who dies with the most toys wins, the one who gives up on her or his life altogether... actually finds true life.

The opposite of loving your life is not hating it, the opposite of loving your life, is loving others.

This week, what are one or two ways that you can turn away from yourself and toward others?

Who can you serve, honour, or feed?

Jesus is calling you to take up your cross and follow him. Are you willing to follow him?

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Once again, these words are not for the fainted hearted. The one who lives like Jesus, the one who is willing to follow Jesus – one who gives for others – will "receive" life.

Where's the benefit if you own everything, but have no life?

This morning when we share the bread and wine remember Jesus' invitation to life!