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~ Matthew 16:21-28 ~

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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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you. 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."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any wish to come after me, 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. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Grace and peace be with you! I am grateful for the invitation to join you for worship today and grateful that you are using the ELCIC Summer Sermon Series. My name is Deacon Gretchen Peterson and I serve as the Assistant to the National Bishop for youth and leadership, and I also serve as one of the Assistants to the Bishop for the Saskatchewan Synod, for the Saskatoon Ministry area.

As you gather for worship today, wherever you are on of Turtle Island, I invite you to take a moment to acknowledge the land and the waterways where you find yourself. For myself, I'd like to give thanks for the ongoing stewardship of this place, the city I call home—Saskatoon, which is on Treaty 6 land and the Homeland of the Métis. I am grateful for the care of this place by the people who have come before me and commit to work towards right relationship as I play, work, and live here.

As we are making our way through the Gospel of Matthew this August, perhaps you are noticing that many of our readings involve a certain disciple. Peter. He has played a prominent role in the last few Sundays.

Going back a few weeks, we heard the reading about Jesus sending the disciples out on a boat, while he himself retreated to the mountaintop to pray, after feeding more than 5000 people.

When Jesus returns, and walks out on the sea to find the disciples, during a raging storm, the disciples think they are seeing a ghost. Jesus calls out to them and they recognize him. Peter is invited to walk out on the water to join his Teacher. He does, and for those first few moments all goes well. But then the winds roar and Peter gets frightened and starts to sink. Jesus reaches out and grabs him.

Last week, we read about Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Upon hearing Peter's declaration, Jesus has one of his own. Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Peter exhibits great faith to proclaim who Jesus truly is, and Jesus seems to show great trust in Peter's ability to be part of the leadership of the movement that is afoot.

And now we come to today's part of Matthew.

Let's take a moment to think about where we are in the timeline of Jesus' life. He has been travelling around—performing miracles, curing sickness, raising the dead, feeding people. He's been sitting at dining room tables with mischiefs and tax collectors. The Roman Empire and others have started to take note of this troublemaker.

The end of his life is coming near, and Jesus knows it. But he has only just started to let those around him, his closest friends, in on what the future is going to hold. Jesus is starting to ease them into the not so good news that his violent death is imminent.

And today, we have this story that takes place between Jesus and Peter.

Peter—the disciple who has shown great faith...and great doubt. Peter, who Jesus identifies as a significant enough one of his followers to name him as the rock on which the future of the church will be built. A human who had the faith to step out of the boat when Jesus beckoned and yet started to sink when the waves grew too high. Peter—a disciple of importance, and also just a human being. A follower who cried out "you are the Messiah!" a couple chapters ago, and then in this chapter Jesus calls him a hindrance.

So...a messy human being, who doesn't get it perfect all the time.

Sound like anyone else you know?

I love the stories in the Bible where the disciples show up as messy human beings. Because it reminds us that to be a follower of Christ, we don't have to have it all together 100%...or maybe even 50%...of the time.

We can show up, just as we are, each and every day. And Jesus loves us.

Remembering this is especially important I think when we have Bible readings like today's. Matthew 16, verses 24 – 28 can seem particularly daunting.

What does it mean to take up the cross and follow Jesus? Throughout history, we have examples of great people of God who have done this. Who have taken up the cross to follow Jesus. Who have literally given up their life, for the sake of the Gospel, just like Jesus says in verses 24 – 25.

“If any wish to come after me, 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.”

In my Lutheran Study Bible, there is a sidenote referencing these verses, in which it mentions Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous German Lutheran pastor who dissented against Hitler and the Nazis. The sidenote says, “For Bonhoeffer, the call to ‘come and die’ proved literal: he was executed as a martyr for opposing the Nazi regime during the Holocaust.”

Reading these verses and then reading the reference to Bonhoeffer can seem daunting indeed.

Is it our calling to die, if we take up the cross of Jesus? Must we all be willing to commit to dying a martyr if we say we follow Jesus?

Perhaps we need to consider not just the Gospel this week as we think to direct our lives as followers of Christ. We should also take into consideration the Romans text.

The whole passage in Romans 12 is entitled “Marks of the True Christian.” Last week, you possibly heard the previous verses in this chapter, which speak about the One Body and the different gifts each person brings to the One Body. And in this week's verses we hear about what makes a Christian.

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.” Instead, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

When we read through these verses, we might have a few reactions, similar to our reactions to the Gospel.

We can't live up to this! How could we possibly show love to those who hurt us? How could we feed our enemies?

Following Jesus is not an easy task some days. Following Jesus can be difficult. It can be frustrating in a world that seems to only care about greed and individualism. But it's clear that our call to follow Jesus is about empathy and care.

Our call to follow Jesus is about risking things. It's about risking the comfortability in our lives sometimes.

Our call to follow Jesus is about finding the people around us who desperately need to hear about the love and grace that is offered to each and every one of us. Sometimes taking up the cross and following Jesus doesn't have to be the biggest, grandest thing. Sometimes taking up the cross and following Jesus can be quite simple.

It can be looking for those around us who need a bit of food. It can be looking for those around us who need some care.

So, as we consider the Gospel of Matthew and the text in Romans, we ask ourselves: what do we hear God calling us to do in terms of thinking about our lives as a Christian? Where do we see that God is urging us to speak up for those less fortunate, for those downtrodden? Where do we feel God nudging us to show these marks of a true Christian—to show genuine love, to feed those who need sustenance, to think differently about the people who we disagree with?

Not everything about being a follower of Jesus needs to be big or grand. Being a follower of Jesus can sometimes mean that we are the quiet wind of change that can help make the people around us have a better life. We can be the quiet wind of empathy, that moves through our communities, bringing about kindness and care for others.

For that, too, is a type of dying to oneself, I think. It's the dying to one's greed and individualism. And it's a way to live out our faith—to live out care and compassion for those around us, because that's what Jesus would be doing too.

So, take a walk around your community or your church community. Look for ways to put aside your own ideas for what betters you or your family or even your church. And brainstorm about what you could do to better those around you.

Even this seemingly simple task can actually be quite hard for us to do these days. Because it requires effort and time. And it requires us to open our eyes to others.

In doing so, we can be vessels who bring God's love to those around us. And just like Peter was tasked to do the same, and he didn't get it right all the time, we too can attempt this task. And we know we won't get it right all the time. But we are called to try—as followers of Christ. Called to try to bear Christ's love and grace to those around us. To be agents of change. To show love and kindness, even when it's difficult.

May God bless our endeavours to try to be Christ's presence in the world! We won't always be successful, but we will plant seeds and only God knows what fruit those seeds might bear.

Amen.