

The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost, September 3, 2023

Rev. Gerald Luck

Text: Matthew 16:21–28

Theme: Comfortable in Truth

Concept: The comfortable truth of Christianity is not found in what we face for our beliefs, but in the One who died and rose for us.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Heavenly Father through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. (1 Timothy 1:2)

Matthew 16:21–28

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from 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, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in
Thy sight O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)*

The comfortable truth of Christianity is not found in what we face for our beliefs, but in the One who died and rose for us. It's found in the cross and in the One who bore it for our sake. As such it's found in each one of us, too, for everyone who trusts in His promises becomes a partaker in God's comfortable truth by grace, and can say without reservation that they live in His peace - the peace that passes all understanding.

This is the truth of Christ. His cross is our comfort, even while the thought of it makes us uncomfortable. After all, we struggle with the truth of the cross.

We're very much like Simon-Peter in this: we don't want to see our Saviour stretched out upon the cross, bearing its shame. This, after all, is not where the very Son of God belongs. He, in His righteousness, should be our leader. He should be the one who guides us in paths of righteousness and leads us to pastures by still waters, not the One who is suffering and dying on that tree on our behalf.

But how could we possibly follow Him apart from the cross? We who are sinful from birth and continue on in our sinfulness fail miserably at keeping God's Holy Ten Commandments, even in our redemption. While we want, we're unable to carry any such cross. But that is not the cross Jesus is asking to bear. As a matter of fact, that is the very cross Jesus is removing from our shoulders.

Jesus knows that we are unable to save ourselves and considers any such attempt to spare Him from His God appointed task a work of the devil. He tells us

sharply, "Get behind me Satan," not to put us down but to tell us that any such thought of preventing His atonement would only lead to our eternal death and our eternal descent into hell. Our Saviour's cross precludes any such notion. It is the very place where we and our Lord are glorified.

In the opening verse of Psalm 46, the psalmist writes, "God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble." We're blessed to carry the cross as the writer of this psalm did.

It's God's grace and God's sufficiency that spares us from His wrath. His Son gladly fulfills the Father's will and bears the burden of our sin to its destruction. Those who deny this redemptive work by rejecting Christ outright or by trying to add to His atoning sacrifice by their own acts of righteousness overlook the victory our Saviour won over sin death and the devil. The former brings about his own death by the rejection of God's gift of faith, but so too the latter, because he confuses the glory of the cross with the glory of man.

We can only be saved by the grace of God. Our works never enter into the picture. Jesus, God's Christ is the only way, the only truth, and the only life, and no one comes to the Father but by Him. This narrow gate is the only gate to heaven, and the "blood theology" of the gospel. It is the sacrifice which involves substitution. Redemption by the blood of God's Son and the cleansing of the soul which can only be received by us by God's gift of faith is the only thing that can ever save us. That's why the psalmist goes on to tell us, "Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." (Psalm 46:10)

Cease striving, and pick up the cross.

There's no mystery in the fact that Jesus tells us to pick up this instrument of death and follow Him. Those who are baptized into Christ Jesus will realize it right away because they are immediately received into Christ's death. In Baptism, their old selves - that old Adam which represents the complete body of sin is brought to its demise. (Cf. Romans 6:3 ff). With that accomplished, that very same creature rises to newness of life in Him who saves. "For the death that [Jesus] died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God."

Martin Luther put it this way: "[Baptism]," he said, "indicates that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

Remembering that daily contrition is the humbling ourselves to follow God's word and that repentance doesn't just turn from sin but trusts in the atoning work of Christ, was are compelled all the more to cling to the cross that saves us, not just once but time after time after time.

While were were doing our VBS up north this one young girl brought me a colouring page that she'd defaced. Likely, she thought it fun to push my buttons and tried to shock me by drawing all sorts of horrible things on the page and even began explaining them to me with great joy and elation. I put my arm around her and, gently calling her by name, I said, "My dear sister in Christ, do you remember how Jesus chose to be your friend and how He died upon that cross to save you?" "Yes," she replied.

"Is that how you really want to treat Him, after He's done so much for you."

She got really quiet and lowered her head and said in a really soft voice, "Do you

think I could get another colouring page?”

I can't even begin to think how many times I've had to ask my Lord for another colouring page in my Christian walk. The instances are too numerous to count and too sorrowful to recall. But I do know this: I know that He who saved me has kept His promise of redemption and washed me repeatedly in His blood.

And I know that He's washed you in His blood too. Therein lies the hope that we all have.

Taking up the cross shields us from hopelessness. It protects our hearts. And that's the real benefit to us, especially in this world so fraught with sin, because the cross is permanent. Everything else this world has come to rely upon and everything that this in this world that people have put their hope in will someday cease to exist. Their hope will end, but yours will not.

Your sufficiency, your strength, and your hope is upheld in the cross. It's upheld by God who has given you His faith in His One and only Son. And that cross is real. Were it not, the world would ignore it and not mock it and Satan and all of his forces of evil wouldn't be working so hard to steal it away.

Cling to that cross and carry it with you every day of your life, or rather let that cross be your anchor and know with all certainty that it will hold you to life eternal. For by it you have been given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. By. It you've been given into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, and into an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (Cf. 1 Peter 1:3ff)

Know with all certainty that you are not alone in this journey. Know that God has brought you here and He has been at your side continually during your struggle offering you the assurance of His presence - both spiritually and physically.

Know that by the cross Jesus has made you partakers of His holiness by the power of His word and by the gift of His altar. There, Jesus, of His own free will has laid Himself upon your heart in that blessed sacrament of Holy Communion and He will continue to assure you of His presence to the day He calls you into eternity.

Know and trust all of these things are yours by the cross and and that nothing else will be needed,

This is the comfortable truth of God. Nothing else will be needed, save the grace of God that was made manifest upon the cross of Jesus Christ your Lord.

Know it, and continue on under that grace. Continue on under the cross,

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

May the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen (Philippians 4:7)