

Matthew 16: 21-28

Romans 12: 9-21

Jeremiah 15: 15-21

Psalm 26: 1-8

WE PRAY THAT as Christians, our lives represent the words spoken in our sacred book, the Bible. Today, we explore Matthew 16:21-28

From that time on, Jesus Christ 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 stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "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. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their soul? Or what will they give in return for their soul? "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."

First of all, I want to offer a catch-up on our place in Matthew's gospel of Jesus. This section of Matthew, from about chapters fourteen to twenty, is Matthew's exploration of the various perspectives people have about what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. There is some misunderstanding of the "Jesus Messiah". Some people were, by now, pretty excited about the "healing the sick, providing food for Judean and Gentile alike" Messiah who reminded them of the venerable Moses. The religious leaders, however, were more looking for a victorious King-Messiah to deliver Israel and defeat pagan oppressors that they felt was promised them in Psalm 2, Daniel 2. They saw Jesus as a false teacher and wished him dead for a while.

Specifically, where we are in Matthew, Chapter 16 is a **turning point** where Jesus begins telling his disciples that he will die. Now we focus on Jesus' suffering, noticing as we go that Jesus' suffering mirrors the suffering ministries of the latter prophets of the Hebrew Bible: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel Hosea, Amos, and Zachariah. I find it so comforting that the work of Jesus is ancient, and God, far from giving up on us, became one of us to, yet again, try to help us be the creatures that God created.

In our scripture today, Jesus tells the 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." However, historians tell us that if Jesus were to die at the hands of the religious leaders, he would typically have been stoned. He doesn't claim that he will die by being stoned. He doesn't tell his followers to "stand in front of the stoners"; he says, "Take up your cross." Jesus is talking about his death on the cross.

Peter, still thinking that the Messiah must be a victorious leader/warrior and can't imagine his Messiah marching willingly to his death, so, in the tradition of his time, Peter challenges Jesus to an honour match. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

But Jesus retorts, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." The church has attributed a great deal to 'Satan' and his band of evildoers, but here, Satan is a "tester of loyalties,"... and loyalty is essential. The core of this challenge is that Jesus is

clearly NOT loyal to God because God MUST want a victorious warrior Messiah who lives to banish those horrible Romans.

However, Jesus is victorious in this honour challenge by assuring Peter that he (Jesus) is loyal to God, and it is Peter who is not loyal to God, but loyal only to human needs.

Peter 0 ... Jesus 1 Jesus has the HONOUR ... loyalty to God.

We've talked about honour over the past months, its importance in first-century Judea, and even its significance today. Here, Jesus, yet again, as he did in the Beatitudes, takes the first-century 'weaponry' out of honour and hands the wealth of 'honour' to all of humanity. He assures us that honour is not a result of our status, wit, or position in society but solely due to our loyalty to God ... our faith in God.

How do we remain loyal to God? How do we have faith in God? Our bible speaks of people being uncertain, but uncertainty is just faith confirming itself through experience; our bible speaks of people doubting, but doubt is just faith keeping its eyes open; our bible speaks of people who are wrong sometimes ... oh, the wrongness! ... but being wrong is just part of the journey of learning.

The only natural predator of faith is fear.

Our Psalm reading today says,

"I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you."

Jesus challenges his disciples ... and he challenges us two thousand and twenty-three years later:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

I invite you to picture what this instruction meant to the audience of the first century. They knew what 'the cross' meant. It wasn't yet a symbol of the sacrificing love of God that it is for us today. It was an instrument of death, a tool of the Empire to murder anyone crossing their path; a bloody, horrific show of force to strike fear into anyone planning to oppose the Empire. Jesus' followers had seen thousands of people crucified at Roman hands on the 'cross.' It was not a symbol of love. We are told that the Romans exercised this particular method of death to instill fear. And it worked. The cross was a symbol of fear.

Jesus says, "Take up your cross ... deny yourself ... lose your life for my sake."

The Greek word we see here for 'take up' is 'ah-ee-ro' ... and 'ah-ee-ro' can mean lift up (which I have always thought it meant here) ... to carry or bear your cross. Certainly, that's what I was taught as a child. Bear that cross, bear that fear. But as I explored this text carefully, I found that another usage of 'ah-ee-ro' is to 'take away,' to 'remove'.

Now we have an interpretation that demands, "remove your cross." Remove that which is the most fearful for you. Remove the only natural predator to faith in God. Remove your fear.

"Deny yourself". Deny that which is the dark underbelly of the 'self.' Remove fear.

Because the only natural predator of FAITH is FEAR.

The Prophet Jeremiah tells us,

If you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the LORD.

Be loyal to God, trust in God, have faith in God. Jesus, that ever-so-amazing Saviour, tells us that our fear is the only thing stopping us from a complete engagement with God.

Taking 'fear' out of the equation is an amazing exploration.

What do we fear?

This is an exciting exploration, and I can tell you the most challenging part is the realization that I am being asked to remove my fear. It turns out I'm a bit happy with my fear. But this is necessary if we want to 'deny our loyalty to that which is human' and do it in the nature of Jesus the Christ, in love.

I'll tell you what I fear... right off the top of my head and invite you to start your personal list. I fear aging and all that it brings. I fear the aches and pains that might mean immobility. I fear being alone. I fear not having enough money to support myself. I fear the problems that my children might have. Oh my ... when I started making a list, I realized I have a LOT of fear.

But I am told to remove my fear, deny that which is fear, and follow the path of Jesus. Remove fear and have faith in God.

Which Jesus did, even unto death.

When we are afraid, though, Paul, our fantastic applier of Jesus' preaching, instructs, in his letter to the people in the new church in Rome, that we don't respond to the fear ...

"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." No, "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.

So, it's not that we can't be afraid; it's that we are not helping ourselves by responding to the fear. Do not repay evil with evil. Live peaceably with all, fear included, and let God take care of those things that we fear. Fear will only lead us down the wrong path. Keep your heart in the right place, with God.

So many of our fears are buried deep in our hearts. Deep in our childhoods, deep in our bodies. So, today, we can begin by just noticing when a fear arises. Through being present with God, through prayer, lay that fear down... deny the fear. Go with God. AMEN