

+ 15th Sunday After Pentecost: September 13th, 2020 +
St Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin
Pastor Corey Van Kampen
“Follow Jesus on the Way of the Cross”

Expectations are quite a powerful thing, aren't they? They have a way of shaping the way we live our lives and the way we experience everything that happens. As an example, if you're paying \$300 a night for a hotel room, what might you expect? Probably a room that is far more in the realm of fancy than plain -- or at a place that is far more exotic or resort-like than it is local? For \$300 a night, I know I'd be expecting at the very least that the place will have a great pool, a large, comfortable room for my family of 6, and a hot breakfast with lots of variety at no extra cost. And if the place didn't live up to those expectations, I'd be quite disappointed or even upset. Expectations are powerful. Now, the power of expectations applies not just to hotels and such -- it also applies to how we look at Jesus and our lives as his followers. What are you expecting? What are you expecting from Jesus? What are you expecting life to be like as one who believes in him? That's what we'll be answering today as we look at this gospel lesson from Matthew 16.

Matthew 16:21-26 From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised again. ²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “May you receive mercy, Lord! This will never happen to you.” ²³ But Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a snare to me because you are not thinking the things of God, but the things of men.” ²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. ²⁵ In fact whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ After all, what will it benefit a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for his soul?

Jesus has just asked his disciples life's most important question: “Who do you say I am?” They answered correctly, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” That was to say to Jesus, “You are the one that God promised to send, the King that we've been waiting for since before the days of Abraham, the Son of God.” But now the harder part: if Jesus is the Christ, the messiah, the Son of God, what does that mean? Matthew says, **From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised again.** Instead of going to Jerusalem to conquer, he had to go to the cross. He had to go to Jerusalem, suffer there, and be killed. That's what it meant that Jesus was the Messiah.

This was shocking to the disciples. They had never heard anything like it before. So Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. “Don't talk that way, Jesus. We won't let that happen.” But even more shocking is the rebuke that Jesus gives back to Peter, **“Get behind me Satan. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”** Peter and the others couldn't conceive of a Messiah, a Son of God, who suffered. It didn't fit what they expected of him. They were expecting the Messiah to be a conqueror, who would set them

free from Roman tyranny. But their sights were too small. Jesus didn't come to drive out the Romans. He came to drive out the prince of this world, the devil. He did not come to set them free from political oppression. He came to set them free from slavery to sin and from death itself -- physical, spiritual, and eternal death. For him to accomplish this work, it was necessary that he suffer and die and then rise again-- and in trying to talk Jesus out of suffering, Peter had actually become an obstacle, a voice that was aligned with Satan himself and needed to be rebuked. Jesus was going the way of the cross, because that was the only way that leads to our rescue from sin and death.

How we look at Jesus and his work has a profound impact on our expectations as his followers here on this earth and in this life. Jesus did not come to be our Savior for this life -- to help us to follow our dreams and live our best life ever right now. He came to be a savior from sin. This is why he had to go the way of the cross -- it was to die in our place so that we can be forgiven. So to make sure our expectations of him -- a Savior from sin -- and our lives as his followers are in line with each other, to make sure we don't have our sights set too small, Jesus says, **"If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."** It's not about a comfortable life sipping a martini on a beach or anything like that -- or even a life free from the worst troubles.

In short, we should, as God's people, expect to walk a path that in some way resembles the one that Jesus walked - the way of the cross. Often we hear this call to deny self, take up our cross and follow Jesus, and what we think of is something like this, "If we hold to what God says about things that are unpopular in our world, we should expect that people aren't going to like us. Maybe they'll even try to persecute us." And, to be sure, being opposed or worse for holding to God's Word and teaching all God's Word certainly is a part of what Jesus is getting at here, but if we think that's the heart of what he's telling us here, our understanding is too shallow and too narrow. To deny oneself is, in summary, to say no to our selfish and sinful desires. To take up the cross is, in general, to endure challenges, struggles, heartaches, pains, and even death that might specifically come on you because you are a Christian. These can take many forms. It can be suffering persecutions. More often, it is the hard struggle to choose what is right rather than easy, what is good rather than what is convenient, to serve God rather than self and then the challenges and results that come from those decisions.

Perhaps the most practical description of that it means to deny oneself and take up the cross is actually found in 1 Corinthians 13. Usually heard at weddings, as a young man and woman look at each other with puppy-dog eyes, those descriptions are anything but sappy and emotional. Taking up the cross is taking up the hard work of loving your fellow human beings the way Jesus loves you, especially your fellow Christians. Taking up the cross means being patient -- denying yourself the rush to anger or judgment or false conclusions about a person. Instead patience seeks to understand where that other person is coming from, why they think and feel the way that they do. It means being kind -- treating them with a pleasant demeanor and doing good for them even and especially when you might think they don't deserve it - denying yourself revenge in actions, words, or even attitudes. It means to refrain from resenting others for the blessings that God has seen fit to give to them -- and not to you.

Taking up the cross means refusing to claim credit and glory for good things that happen to you and others in your life -- even if they are the result of your hard work, and instead passing the credit and glory on to others. It means to see their needs and concerns and thoughts as greater than mine. It means to forgive, even when you've been greatly wronged and the cost of forgiving cuts you to the core and makes you weep. It means to protect -- to look out for others' safety in body and soul, to trust -- to assume that they are speaking the truth unless absolutely proven otherwise. It is to hope -- to see the best in a person and who God can make them to be, and it is to persevere -- to never give up on a person no matter how hard-headed they seem to be. Finally you might be asking, "Who should I do this for? Who is worthy of my self-denial and my cross bearing?" The answer to that question is to ask, "Who did Jesus do it for? Who was worthy of his self-denial and cross bearing?" The answer is everyone, no exceptions.

So, how are we all doing on that? On the self-denial? On the taking up the cross? For everyone? Who is willing to stand up in the front of church or the parking lot and to say, "You all should be more like me because I've got this self-denial and cross-carrying down to a science." Any volunteers? None, right? Though I will say I strive at it, I'm not going to say that I'm some shining example of it all. You know that there are things that you would hate to give up no matter how much good it would do your fellow Christians. You all know that there are some things you just won't do for the people God puts into your life. You all know that there are some people who you'd rather not help and serve. I'm sure I've got my blind spots too. Based on our own self-denial and cross-bearing, each of us are absolutely unqualified to be Jesus' disciples.

And yet, Jesus still calls us. He doesn't just say to deny ourselves and take up the cross -- sure he does say that -- but then he invites us to follow him. You see, Jesus doesn't call us to do a single thing that he has not already done perfectly for us. He calls us to follow him on the way of the cross -- because he's already been there and done that and done it and walked that path perfectly for you and for me. He lived a life of perfect self-denial -- entirely focused on carrying out the will of his Father and serving the people around him. When he was hungry, he refused to turn stones into bread because to do so would have been self-serving. He would regularly put off meals and sleep because there were people who needed him. His life of self-denial was done perfectly in your place and mine. And Jesus certainly took up a cross, didn't he? He took up the struggle of carrying all the times we failed to love, all the times we served self-rather than denied self. He carried all that to a literal cross where he died for it all under God's curse. And then he rose again on the third day. Now, by faith in him, you've been declared to be perfectly qualified to be Jesus disciples -- because your sins are forgiven. Not only that, by faith in God, God sees you as people who do deny themselves in all the right ways and who do take up the cross of loving and serving God and others. He calls you and me to follow him on the way of the cross because just as he rose on the third day, so the way of the cross leads to our ultimate resurrection and life with him.

And while we live in this world still walking the way of the cross, he gives us a promise. **"Whoever loses his life for me will find it."** Whatever we do without in this life, whatever we give up, whatever we lose -- even if it's our own life. In the end, we won't miss it. It's nothing in comparison to knowing him as he really is and seeing him face to face. It's nothing in comparison to the eternal life that Jesus gives us.

So, what should we expect of Jesus? We should expect him to be savior not from earthly troubles -- pain, oppression, or sorrow, but a savior from sin and death. And what should we expect as we follow him? We should expect that while in this world, we will follow him through sufferings, trials, and challenges, through struggles against sin and against temptation. It is not going to be easy, but in the end we'll join him in glory forever. That's where the way of the cross leads. That's the way that Jesus went for us. That's the way that we follow him. Amen!