

Sept. 3, 2023

Pr. Steve

Texts: Jeremiah 15: 15-21; Romans 12: 9-21; Matthew 16: 21-28

In the name of God, Abba Imma, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've never quite figured out, after all these years, how we're on a holiday weekend when we just want to barbecue hamburgers, and we get a text like this.

In response to Peter's revelation of Jesus last week, *'You are the Messiah'*, Jesus in the text today [Mt 16: 21-28] delivers hard news about the Passion. *'Death is stalking us. Therefore, it is necessary, and I must go to Jerusalem to face it.'* Is that Fight or Flight? It's neither. This is the heart of the Gospel. It refuses to deny all that would take us down, and Jesus moves towards it—without vengeance, without violence, without any attempt to destroy. This is the Gospel.

Jesus goes to Jerusalem not to die... (How many of us learned that in Sunday School? 'He goes to Jerusalem to die.') No, he goes to Jerusalem to expose the corruption of power and greed, the corruption of the truth, the corruption of human hearts. He's going to Jerusalem to stop all the crucifixions by which we take each other down. (We're pretty good at that, don't you think? Even on an off day, we're pretty good at taking others down.) He goes to Jerusalem to open up a new way of life—for hope, and healing, and transformation. He's going to Jerusalem to make clear that unconditional love, embodied unconditional love, moves through death. The ultimate dead end he moves towards—to show us a way through.

Then, Peter says, *'No way! You're not doing that, and we're not going with you!'*  
And Jesus says, *'Get away! Get behind me, Satan!'*

Evil is loose. It permeates all of us, and all of humanity. And the very heart of evil is always the attempt to dissuade, sabotage Jesus' efforts—and ours—to move toward the Cross. Because the Cross, that crucifixion of Christ, is bringing us healing and transformation. And it is the Cross which overcomes evil.

We want to go every which other way, circle around. *'There's got to be a nice way to do this kind of thing, yes?'* We want to pretend. We want to find options. We don't want to have to live a merciful path, partly because we recognize it's costly, but it also makes a difference. It needs to make a difference in us, first, before it can make a difference in our relations.

What does it take to reach us? I know all of us have siblings, or children, or parents, or friends who are struggling right now. They're in darkness, and we want to help them so much. We want to reach out. Perhaps we can even see ways through that would help them. But they resist, reject. Whether self-consumed, [or] self-destructive, they just don't want to hear it. *'I'll keep to myself. Mind your own business. How do you know what I'm experiencing?'* And we all

say to ourselves on the inside, *'What does it take to reach you?'* Perhaps some of us recall living that way ourselves (yes?), when loved ones reached out to us. What does it take?

Well, I want you to hear a very brief summary of the conversations between Peter and Jesus both last week and in today's text. I'm inviting Jen to join me, so you get to hear these. So, this is just what occurred last Sunday and today.

Today: Jesus says to Peter: *'Get behind me, Satan!'*  
Jen [last week]: *'Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah.'*

Today: Jesus says, *'You are an obstacle, a scandal, a stone of stumbling for me.'*  
Jen [last week]: *'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my community.'*

Today: *'Peter, you are not on the side of God, but of human beings.'*  
Jen [last week]: *'Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.'*

What a contrast! What a contrast!

Jesus says, *'Get away!'* Why? Because *'Peter, you are preventing merciful love from happening, from birthing the changes of healing and transformation that people need. You are getting in the way. It is only the Cross that can deliver this, facing evil at its depths. It shall be overcome. Get away.'*

And then in a second message he says, *'Get behind me'*—because Peter can still be a disciple, like all of us. But discipleship always requires the Cross, that transforming Cross, which is this mystical path of rejection. We don't want to go there. There is no automatic—*'Oh, this makes sense to me. What a great plan. We've got a strategic plan here that we just put it in motion and we perfectly follow it.'*

It's not that. We are baffled, we are overcome. This Cross is contradiction, paradox, ambiguity—it appears life-defeating, and yet Jesus says, *'Pick up your cross and follow me.'* Why? Well, he gives three reasons. [Mt. 16: 25-27] *'Try to save your life, you'll lose it. Lose your life for my sake, you'll find it.'*

In this wonderfully beautiful valley in which we live, how many people don't we know already—who are even great successes—and yet filled with despair and dread and fear, grasping at anything to keep themselves alive—the emptiness that pervades so much of our life today. Trying to save our own lives—dead end. You've seen it. Dead end.

*Pick up your cross.* Why? Well, *'What does it profit you to gain the entire world and forfeit your life?'* As bad as it is for the one-percenters, it's so many more beyond that, (right?), seized by greed and power, desperately clutching, grasping for life. And even when you win and become a success, you can still be empty.

*Pick up your cross. Why? Because the Son of Man, the Bar Enasha, the New Humanity, is coming with all of the angels to review and reward each on their own choices.*

*Inside of us we all say right now, 'Oh, I knew it. I knew God is out to get us. The Judgment Day is still coming. No matter how many sermons Jesus gives us through Steve, there's still that hidden agenda: God's going to get us.'*

I know that's what it sounds like. I agree; I agree. But friends, it is the overwhelming centrality of Matthew's Gospel to lead us to mercy, and the practice of mercy, because that is the only thing which can change and heal us, and lead to a new life. That what's Matthew is urging—not spiritual accolades and awards, success stories. Practice mercy because that's where it's at. Living in relationship with others, living in communion with the heart—in small ways and great, this is where life emerges, and that all of us have tasted.

So, this is Paul's summary today of what the life of the Cross looks like, feels like, is lived like.  
[Romans 12: 14-21]

*Bless your persecutors. Never curse them, bless them. Rejoice with others when they rejoice. Be sad with those in sorrow. Give the same consideration to all others alike. Pay no regard to social standing. Meet humble people on their own terms. Don't congratulate yourself on your own wisdom. Never pay back evil with evil. As much as possible, to the utmost of your ability, be at peace with everyone. Never try to get revenge: that's for the Retribution. God says, 'I will repay.' If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat. If your enemy is thirsty, give him something to drink, and you will be heaping hot coals on their heads. Do not be mastered by evil, but master evil with good.*

What does it take to reach us?  
Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.