

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
August 28, 2011
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28
"Cross-Bearing"
Pastor John Guthrie

A particular man decided he wanted to pursue monastic life. The order he joined stipulated that novices could speak only every seven years, and then only two words. At the end of seven years this man met with his abbot, and said, "Too cold". Another seven years passed, the novice met with his abbot and said "Bad food." The next seven years passed, the man met again with the abbot, and said "I quit". The abbot replied, "Good. All you've done since you came here is complain."

In order to fully grasp what is going on in this passage from Matthew, we once again need to see what has happened in the preceding verses. In fact, we saw those verses last week: Jesus asks his disciples who they say he is. We also saw that Jesus asks us that very same question, and the answer we give is very critical. The answer we give to that question ultimately determines how we will view the life of discipleship, and therefore, connects directly to today's reading from Matthew.

You will remember that Peter replies to the question that Jesus asks, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Remember that the word Messiah in Hebrew and the word Christ in Greek both mean, "Anointed One," that is, the one who has been anointed or chosen by God to bring hope and redemption and restoration to the world. Peter's answer is a very good one! Peter seems to get it. Peter seems to be on board. Indeed, in response to Peter's reply, Jesus blesses him and tells him that he didn't come up with his excellent answer on his own, but rather that God the Father revealed it to him. Peter is on a roll. The future looks bright for Peter. He will become president and CEO of the band of disciples.

Note that Jesus also tells the disciples, in chapter 16 verse 20, that they are not to tell anyone else what has been revealed to Peter, that he is indeed the Messiah. The time is not yet right for that revelation to be made.

Then we come to today's reading. Peter's brilliance is tarnished, his future darkened, his understanding sullied. Peter doesn't quite get it after all. In fact, because Peter fails so brilliantly to get what is going on, Jesus calls him Satan.

We read in chapter 16 verse 21, "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." This is the first of three predictions in Matthew that Jesus makes of his coming suffering, death, and resurrection; the other two are in chapters 20 and 26. You get the impression that this prediction becomes central in what Jesus has to say to his disciples, from that time forward.

Peter, perhaps out of shock, contradicts his teacher: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" Strange isn't it? Peter has just identified Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Now he tells Jesus that he's got it wrong. Peter cannot grasp that the Messiah is,

by God's plan, a Messiah who will suffer and die. Oh, and don't forget, one who will be raised on the third day after his death. Somehow Peter doesn't hear or comprehend that last part, about the resurrection. All he can hear is the part about suffering and death.

It is at this point that Jesus says to him, "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." Peter the rock has become Peter the stumbling block.

After Jesus condemns Peter, he tells them what his fate means for the disciples: they also are to choose the way of suffering. Because he will suffer, they as his followers must also be prepared to suffer for his sake. Not suffering just for suffering, but suffering in his name.

Jesus tells his disciples, "If you want to become my followers you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. Those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

This concept of self-sacrifice was very real for the readers of Matthew's gospel late in the first century AD, because it is clear from multiple passages in the gospel that they were undergoing persecution from the Jewish religious leadership, just as Jesus had been. The words of Jesus are encouragement and reassurance for a community of Christ-followers who are being persecuted for their faith.

For us today, living in the United States in the 21st century, things are very different. We are not persecuted for what we believe. Indeed, we are guaranteed the right to worship in whatever way we wish to worship. Nevertheless, Jesus speaks to us just as surely as he did to those first-century disciples.

As we noted last week, Christ-followers are called to be peculiar people. We are called to be different. We are commanded not to buy into the value system of our culture, or at least not to buy into it lock, stock and barrel.

Last week we saw that Paul in his letter to the Romans counseled them to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. In the Roman letter and in all of his other correspondence, Paul was very much concerned with the life and faith of particular communities of Christ-followers, whether it be the Romans or the Corinthians or the Thessalonians. So while the advice he gives is often aimed at individuals, its purpose is always to build up and strengthen the faith community.

In the same way, faith communities today, like Community Presbyterian Church, for example, are called to model this willingness to deny themselves and to take up their cross and to follow Jesus.

One seminary professor recently performed an impromptu survey of church mission statements. He looked at websites and old bulletins to see what churches were saying about themselves, and how they presented themselves to the world. The churches generally described their mission in terms of being warm and welcoming communities. They wrote of their commitment to serve Jesus by ministering to the needs of the community. They described their efforts to provide excellent educational programs, fellowship opportunities, and weekly worship. They declared themselves committed to inspiring, biblical preaching. *But not a church he surveyed mentioned the call to suffer in the name of Jesus.* What was missing from practically every mission statement was the cross—at least, the cross Jesus is trying to show us in this passage

from Matthew.

There is one part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) which I greatly prize. It reads like this: “The church is called to undertake its mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond itself to the new reality in Christ.” What matters is not the continuation of our church, in spite of its many centuries of faithful worship and service to Christ. What matters is Christ. Our survival as a church is not the ultimate purpose; Christ is the ultimate purpose.

I fear that the message of the cross is too often ignored or downplayed by the most visible expressions of Christianity in our American culture. If you listen to the television evangelists – you know, the ones with all the hair – you rarely if ever hear the message of denying oneself, taking up a cross, and following. Typically the message is all about what's in it for you, and frankly that is a gross distortion of the gospel. Teaching along those lines completely neglects the message that Jesus delivers here and in two other places in Matthew, and in three places in Mark and in three places in Luke. Indeed the message of patient suffering permeates the entire witness of scripture.

The gospel is not about us. It's about Christ. And while it is absolutely true that God desire to bless us individually and as a church, that blessing may come to us through the path of self-denial and cross-bearing. If we minimize or lose that message, we have warped the gospel. Then we should not be surprised if Jesus were to say to us, individually or corporately, “Get behind me, Satan. You are fixed on human things, not things of God.”

Jesus ends this particular teaching with a reference to the coming redemption of all the earth. “For the Son of Man will come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what they have done.” Matthew has this annoying and troubling practice of emphasizing those elements in Jesus' teaching that require us to do something.

Matthew is constantly reminding us that just believing is not sufficient. One of the most obvious of those is back in chapter 7, where Jesus says to his followers, “Not everyone who calls me Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but rather those who do the will of my Father in heaven.” For another rather severe example, see chapter 25, verses 31 to 46, in which we are told that failure to care for those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, lonely, sick, or imprisoned is failure to care for Jesus himself, and the consequences of that failure are very dire indeed. We are not saved by what we do, but good deeds must and will flow from a life committed to Christ. If there is no fruit, there is doubt about the genuineness of faith.

So cross-bearing must be visible and it must be obvious. We have to do things in the name of Jesus and for the sake of the gospel. It is not sufficient to claim Jesus as Lord and then go on about our happy way, untransformed by him and his presence and his message. We must be transformed, not conformed to this world.

If we want to be followers of Christ, there is no other way, no easier way. We must deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow. We follow a suffering Messiah, and we cannot willfully avoid the path of suffering for his sake when we find ourselves on it.

If we seek to save our lives, we will lose them. But if we lose our lives in serving Christ, then we find them. How wonderful is that?