

Pentecost 13

"The Cost of Discipleship"

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Christ the King

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Text: Matthew 16:21-26

What's going on here? In one verse Jesus praises Peter and just a few verses later rebukes him. Last week we heard Jesus praise the disciple Peter for his profession of faith. When Jesus asked all 12 of them who they believed he was, it was Peter who blurted out, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." To which Jesus replied, "Blessed are you" (did you hear that? "Blessed are you") "Simon, Son of Jona. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:16-18). By the way, in English we don't catch the pun Jesus is making. The name "Peter" comes from the Greek word "Petros" which means "rock" (so, "You are Peter the 'petros'"). Cecile Gibson told me as she left church last Sunday that in French the play on words is obvious, as it is in Spanish and most romance languages.

Another aside. Although next month Lutherans and Roman Catholics around the world will come together to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation because of all the progress made by the two denominations over the past 50 years, this passage is still understood differently by the two churches. Roman Catholics understand it to mean that Jesus is building his

church upon the man, Peter. Lutherans and most others believe it's upon the faith professed by Peter and all disciples that the church is founded.

But back to the topic at hand. Because there is a sudden shift. Jesus quickly goes from "blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah" one minute, to "Get behind me Satan, you are a stumbling block" the next when Jesus begins to tell them what to expect from the Messiah from this point on.

In today's Gospel, which follows immediately upon Peter's profession of faith and Jesus' promise to his church, we're told "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering . . . and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

In other words, he wanted them to know what he and they were in for. And that's when Peter, the Rock, rebuked Jesus (that's the word, "rebuked"), "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you" (16:22). Forcing Jesus to rebuke him with his, "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" (v. 23).

So where is this headed? Jesus is about to burst their bubble. If they think hanging with Jesus is going to be all sunshine and roses, they're in for a rude awakening. And because Jesus is always upfront, he comes right out with it. "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 life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" (16:24-26).

And with this we begin to understand what is called "the theology of the cross," and the cost of discipleship. The theology of the cross stands in direct contrast to the theology of glory so heavily touted these days, by the Gospel of prosperity preachers, as in, "God wants you to be wealthy and have everything your heart desires." No, Jesus wants us to deny ourselves and pick up the cross and follow him, as today's text shows.

Is all gloom and doom? Of course not. But as Jesus warned, "A disciple is not above his master. If this is how the Lord was treated, what can you expect"

I stole the title for this sermon from the title of a book written by the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was killed by the Nazis for his opposition to Hitler. In his book, "The Cost of Discipleship," which is still a best-seller, he wrote, "When Jesus bids a person, 'Follow me,' he bids that person 'come and die.'" Meaning we die to self and selfish ambitions because of our faithfulness to him.

Bonhoeffer takes issue with Christians who feel oh-so comfy in the church because of, what he called, "cheap grace." Cheap grace, if I may paraphrase him, is the desire for forgiveness without having to undergo repentance, absolution without confession, mercy without contrition, God's blessing without faithfulness, grace without obedience, new life without the death of

the old Adam within his, Easter without Good Friday and discipleship without a cross.

In other words, it's life with God on our terms rather than his, wanting all the benefits without the responsibilities. It's being a Christian in name only, without experiencing the rigors of discipleship. It's being part of the Body of Christ, but a rather useless, non-functioning one.

That's cheap grace. Because being a disciple produces all kinds of changes. It's costly. It costs us our old attitudes, prejudices, our self-serving ways, our comfort, and many of our former allegiances. Maybe even our life.

If you think that's exaggerating, just listen again to today's Second Reading:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 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. (Romans 12:9-21)

It's true that as we sing, "Just as I am without one plea," that's the way Jesus takes us, but he doesn't leave us that way.

We are justified by God's grace through faith, without any merit of our own. That's the good news, the heart of the Gospel, God's phenomenal love for us so clearly shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is the good news.

The bad news (or so it might seem, but it's really just more good news) is that he never stops messing with us.

I'm not sure I've ever said it just that way before, but that's what it amounts to. Last weekend we enjoyed singing, "Lead me, guide me." But that doesn't mean we always like where he takes us. But that's the theology of the cross for you, the cost of discipleship. 0