

Matthew 16:21-28: Title: Realignment Theme:

Friends! Let me pray, we'll catch up to where we've been, and then we'll look at today's passage.

Prayer:***Review:***

If we don't remember, the last thing we saw in Matthew is Jesus telling his disciples not to tell anyone at all who he really is.

And who he is is "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," as Peter puts it. Jesus affirms what Peter has just said in an incredibly powerful way, even though the disciples don't really know, can't really know, what it means for Jesus to be who they say he is.

So he begins to explain just what it means to these people who follow him, who are seeking to see the world as he sees the world, understand God as he understands God, and live for God as he lives for God. But it's not the good news they expect it to be.

Explaining:

Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he

must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Now that they recognize Jesus for who he really is, he lets these disciples of his in on what's to come. From this point on we see a shift in Jesus' relationship with his disciples. He's not just teaching them as a teacher; he's engaging them with an intimacy that he hadn't before. Now that they realize who he really is as Israel's Messiah, and accept it, he's letting them know what it means, what the implications are for him--and by extension, of course, for them. Because of course, what's true for the teacher is meant to be true for the one who follows him.

And to be the Messiah isn't what they thought. It's not heroics, it's not triumph, it's not achievement--at least, in any way that'd look good on a report card or in a trophy case. It's suffering at the religious and social elites, it's death, and it's this odd bit about being raised from the dead on the third day. There were all sorts of expectations swirling around about what God's Messiah would do, but none of them talked about his failure. Pop-culture didn't emphasize the suffering of

the Messiah, the fact that every religious authority would reject him.

The disciples might have expected resurrection, influenced by the Pharisees who believed in it. But no one expected just the Messiah's resurrection, much less the Messiah's death first. Resurrection was supposed to happen all at once anyway, not in chunks.

That last bit is so odd, of course, that Peter--who cannot ever help but speak--ignores it, more or less, and just responds to the first part:

Peter:

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Oof! Geeze! There's a reason that this moment in Jesus' and Peter's life has been central to Christian art throughout history and hangs out in our memories and

guts, too. It's a punch to the gut.

Peter has it wrong. Peter simply has it wrong. Jesus is facing his future with eyes wide open, right? He recognizes what's to come in his life, and it's not all rainbows and unicorns, it's...terrible, shameful, painful, even if it ends in glory. For Peter, this is out of bounds. This is wrong. He tries to correct Jesus, and Jesus just rejects the correction. He rebukes Peter in turn.

Jesus calls Peter by the name of humanity's--creation's--greatest enemy. Peter, who believes he's all in, and will be up--until he's painfully and publicly not--is called Satan. We've talked about Satan, the Devil, the Ancient Serpent, Beelzebub, a few times as we've walked through Matthew, and we will again. But he's the enemy of all that's good, using the tools of sin and death to war against everything, sow hate and division wherever he can, and sap our courage through fear.

Jesus calls Peter Satan. And people will daydream up things, here: that, for a moment, this enemy took possession of Peter, was trying again, having failed at Jesus' wilderness Temptation, to trick Jesus into giving up the course of action that would strip the devil of all

power.

I think it's much simpler: In rejecting the way of things laid out for Jesus, Peter is rejecting the very path of things that will set the world right. Jesus won't be overcoming death, inaugurating the reign of God, setting the Spirit loose on all humanity, unless he first enters into the conflict his way of life brings him into with the powers that be.

Peter is, in this moment, taking the devil's side. He simply doesn't have in mind the concerns of God, but merely--only, simplistically, selfishly--human concerns.

There's something something haunting here. To blockade Jesus' course of life, to deny what is inevitable when good gets in the way of evil--at least, until Jesus' return--to ignore the pain of being faithful when you're in a faithless place is to be like the Devil. It's to take up the work of our greatest enemy, not the work of God. It's to see the world from a human perspective, one which always prioritizes safety at any expense, rather than to see the world from God's perspective.

To read this with an open heart is to invite ourselves to

be haunted by it, haunted, maybe, by the Holy Ghost, who asks us, “Whose side are we on?” “Will we be a stumbling block, even now, to the work of God?” And that’s reckoned, I think, in how well we embrace the troubles that come when we faithfully follow Jesus in a world set against him and all he embodies.

Ultimately, here, Jesus has not only just confused them, made them dizzy with a dozen words, he’s also just destroyed any of the secret hopes for glory, power, and honor that they held in their hearts. No one pulled Peter away from Jesus, here; they were on board with what he was doing. Because to be a disciple, a follower, is to make sure that what is true of your teacher is true of you, too. And if this is what’s true of the teacher...well, Jesus affirms their worst fears.

Immediately after this rebuke, this “You don’t have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Jesus continues:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

To Be a Disciple: Denying Ourselves

We get the deny ourselves piece, I think. We know ourselves, our lives, and have both the Holy Spirit and a conscious. Just a gut check reveals what it would mean to “deny ourselves.” But self-denial is bigger than choosing not to eat another handful of Doritos or watch another couple of hours of Netflix.

It means choosing to second-guess all the self-interested moves we make. It means making ourselves less important than this Jesus who we’re following. We begin to learn to trust that if we pursue Jesus’ good, our good will follow.

The goal of self-denial isn’t to empty ourselves. To become, somehow, detached from cares and wants and worries. The goal is instead to fill that space or that time with Jesus’ concerns, his habits, his character. Anytime we shed something, we create room to take up something else--that something else has got to be Jesus.

To Be a Disciple: Taking Up Crosses:

To consider what it means to “take up our crosses” is a trickier thing to do. Whatever it does mean, though, it gets easier the more we deny ourselves and welcome

Jesus' way of life as our own.

Crucifixion had its own original context, its own first meaning, which was a Roman punitive death, a death penalty by the political authorities for some crime or another. We can think of death penalties: electric chairs, firing squads and proprietary injections. This is the cross. And it's a powerful metaphor, right? The cross is a powerful symbol; powerful for us because we think of Jesus when we hear it, but powerful for Peter and the rest of them because they could see crosses here and there, dead people hanging on them. They knew if you stepped too far out of line, the Romans would get you.

Remember that 40 years after Jesus' resurrection, Rome takes out Jerusalem, razes the Temple. Crucifixion was a reminder that this could always happen, and might sometime soon, even to you.

Jesus knows that his way of living is going to get him killed. He is, by choosing to be himself, taking up his own cross every day. Every day he's becoming more of an annoyance, more of a reminder, more of a problem that needs a final solution. This is why he kept who he most truly was a secret; he had things to do before he

was taken out.

When Jesus says that he'll suffer under the religious authorities, and then goes on to talk about his disciples needing to take up their crosses, he's saying that the more they embrace his way of living in the world, choose it over their own inclinations, the more they'll end up in conflict with those who could, if they chose, kill them.

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A Way of Living that Gets You Killed:

And if we are going to mimic his way of living, there will come a point when we find ourselves in conflict with those who have power in the world, religious or political or economic.

Let me caution us, here. What got Jesus killed wasn't that he violently monkey-wrenched the powers that be; it was that he embodied God's love: And a world comfortable with hate has to extinguish love like that; it's poison.

He acted with grace toward those who, from the perspective of the religious experts, shouldn't receive grace. He acted with love toward those who, from their perspective, didn't deserve to be loved. He lifted up dirty half-breeds as role models, broke bread with pagans, and hung out with enemy collaborators. He blasphemed God by speaking for God, and what he spoke was a message of radical mercy, and a fearlessness about crossing the lines that the religious elite had said you can't cross and still stay holy.

He gave a voice and a name and a place at the table to those who the ones in power thought didn't deserve them, and when he couldn't, he left the table to go spend time with them where they were. And in his context, where the religious and political elite were dance partners, the religious elite were able to flex their influence and have him killed.

If there's ever been a case for us making sure politics and religious don't hold hands, get married, and try to have babies, it's Jesus, whose death happened because of the way these two groups were enmeshed.

And if we're disciples, denying ourselves, becoming like him, if we act with the grace he acted like, talk

about God the way Jesus talked about God, go to those who won't come to us because God loves them, and wants us to care for them. If we're following after him, there's one thing, at least, that we in this room will not discover.

What We Won't Discover:

In our context, we won't discover death.

We aren't going to be killed for our faith here. Let's just deal with that. Being like Jesus, modeling God's love and forgiveness and judgment and concerns like Jesus did, simply won't get us killed.

It may metaphorically get us killed. The Church may burn us; whoever is the equivalent of "the elders, chief priests, and law teachers" may cause us some suffering, and they may, if they have political dance partners, use them against us somehow. We may find that we're in conflict with other Christians, with other people generally, because we are modeling Christ.

It's almost certain that in denying ourselves and taking up a cross-carrying life, our generosity will be taken advantage of, our compassion will be abused, our time will be wasted, and we will be manipulated.

Our goodness will be tested nearly to the point of breaking. We may be jailed as we stand up for those who Jesus calls us to, in solidarity, stand with and stand for.

But our bodies just probably aren't going to be broken.

We just don't live in the place Jesus lived. Even if we live the way he lived, deny ourselves, and take up his way of living in the world, intentionally choose to act in kind, compassionate ways that inevitably bring us into conflict with a spiteful, unforgiving, profit-oriented world...we just aren't going to die for it in Worthington or Dublin or Upper Arlington or Columbus or Westerville. At best we'll be dismissed or taken advantage of.

Maybe some small percentage of us may be physically hurt for it; but I confess I don't know anyone who has been. We don't need to apologize for this. We don't need to feel guilty about it.

The Drive:

But I understand the drive behind these things. When Jesus says after this, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will

find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" We get a little anxious.

We want to "lose our lives for him" if it means we'll save them. We want to be on the right team, you know?

We know Jesus isn't being rhetorical here. This is truth that he's experienced. Remember his time in the wilderness, being tempted by the Devil? He's had to really consider if it would be good to gain the whole world, yet lose or forfeit his very self. He knows he is living in a way that will end in his death, and has had to consider what he'll lose if he seeks to save his life instead.

How can we live up to this passage?

Some people have read Jesus' words here and left everything behind them, gone to unsafe places to care for unsafe people, and died for it. Some people have stayed put, but rallied to the side of those who Jesus spent most of his time with--outsiders, foreigners, the ones the religious majority found suspicious and called dirty. They've been jailed, beaten, faced loss. Most

Christians don't do these things; I don't know if many of us intend to.

But if we ask ourselves how we can, in northwest Columbus, "lose our lives for Jesus," I think there is one answer at least. It's not everyone's answer, but it's worth noting.

Here's what I think. You are losing your lives for Jesus' sake. You're just doing it very, very slowly. Your money, slowly going to Kingdom Things. Your time, slowly going to Kingdom Things. Your talents and skill and training, slowly being used for Kingdom of Heaven things, for Jesus' purposes.

Every time you've gone to this meeting or that gathering for Jesus' sake, spent some hour serving others, chosen to give of yourself, embrace inconvenience, trouble, or pain, you're losing some of your life, trading it away to God.

I am sure in this room there are hundreds of unhealthy motivations in the mix; dozens of reasons we do this or that Christian thing that isn't necessarily all about Jesus. But we're still doing it; we're here this morning, and many of us were here last Sunday morning, and

some of us will be here next Sunday, too. We've written checks and offered prayer and saved bags for the pantry, change for this, boxes for that, and taken time out of the bit of time we have, and used it for Jesus' sake.

We are using up our lives. We're following Jesus; literally, embodying him as best as we can in this non-life-threatening place we find ourselves.

And I think most of us don't regret it. Most of us wouldn't say what we've done is a waste, what we've given isn't unnecessary. We don't begrudge the amount of our life that we've given away for Jesus' sake, and some of us may even wish that we've given more. And we have the chance to give more of ourselves up for Jesus' sake, of course. We're always given more chances to do so.

And this is what I think Jesus is getting at in the next verse.

Glory & Reward:

He says "***For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he***

will reward each person according to what they have done.

Jesus has already said he'll come back from death, alive. And not, you know, "Zombie Jesus," but more himself than he was before, fully alive. He's even hinted at the way we, when we die, will be given life again--a better version than we have now.

And he ends this call to discipleship with a simple fact that we should take as a warning-tinged promise: He will come back after his death, and he'll come back with all the glory and power of Heaven in his hands, and we will be rewarded, "each person, according to what they have done."

Jesus' is making a point here, to Peter and the rest, and they have to hear it. They are going to be tempted to distance themselves from him. They say he's God's Messiah, but they'll watch him be killed. They'll face the same doubts we face, doubts that will come when he's risen from the dead and gone away somewhere, to return only God knows when. They will face times when the world will so ramp up its persecution of them that they'll seriously consider whether or not it's time to just call this self-denial, death-penalty embracing thing, and gather together what dregs of dignity, of

honor or glory, they can, and move on to another career, a different life.

They'll be forced to consider again that "Who do you say I am" question and the answer Peter gave voice to for all of them: "The Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Their trust will be tested. And Jesus is laying out for them an assurance: They will be rewarded for their choice to stick with him, rather than give into the world or the temptations of the enemy. This promise of reward, though, isn't just for what's done; it's for what's left undone. If these--and we who follow them--choose the self-protecting way of life embodied in Peter's whispered rebuke, then we'll be rewarded for that, too. But it'll amount to opening an empty box. What we'll be given for our lack of faithfulness is, well, lack. We'll be returned what we've offered.

But what we ought to be offering is all of ourselves; our very lives. Quickly or slowly, in fits, starts, or ideally, with steadiness, discipline, and wide-open eyes. What we want rewarded to us is resurrection in turn; redeemed lives in a redeemed world, where the devil's battle against creation, against us, by way of

sin and death, has finally ended. When Jesus promises reward, after just talking about his own resurrection, this is what he's pointing us to, and he means to motivate us to receive this, to look for this, to not fear denying ourselves, taking up our crosses, or losing our lives. We'll get them back; Paul and others will go on to flesh out what's unspoken here.

And Jesus doesn't mention, here, that these ones who follow him will be rewarded for what they believe about him, for what they've intellectually assented to, whether they hold to the most perfect theology. He's oriented not toward what they believe, but the way their trust in him motivates them--the disciples, us--to choose to live for and like him, no matter what it costs us.

Consequences:

When we live like Jesus and deny ourselves, we are embracing a way of life that is ridiculous given the way the world works. We need Jesus' frank reminder that he'll return with all glory, and we'll be vindicated and rewarded if we can just keep the faith, follow him, until he returns or we're resurrected. We need to see that our lives are wrapped up in his, and cry in prayer with the Psalmist, "What can man do to me?"

In what ways are you denying yourself? In what ways are you giving up your life? In what ways are we preparing ourselves to be able give up our lives, if indeed, we're called to do so quickly, rather than the slow, life-long denial so many of us are living out right now?

How are we tripping up the work of God? Peter pulls Jesus aside to let him know that he, of all people, shouldn't be talking about pain and suffering, and Jesus calls him Satan! What do we believe we get in our lives, now, for following Jesus? Because we can't expect glory, not until Jesus returns; we can't expect reward--every time the world embraces us, rather than hassles us for showing love, it's a miracle of God; and if we're following in Jesus' way of self-denial and love, and being rewarded--praised for our goodness, honored for our compassion, thanked for our service--in this life, those are gifts that we must thank God for.

Because what we ought to expect is that when we live a "love your enemies" life in an "eye for an eye" world, we're going to be seen as problems needing something like a death-penalty.

We have to lean into prayer, lean into the Spirit, and be open to hearing, again, Jesus saying to not only his

disciples, but us: ***“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”*** God will, patiently and lovingly and graciously reveal to us the ways in which we are or are not taking this to heart. And as we slowly lose our lives for Jesus’ sake, I hope that we can discover, in those seasons when more is asked of us than we think we can give, that God is sustaining us, and we are not forsaken, nor abandoned.

Teaser:

Today’s passage ends, just, weird.

Jesus has just declared what it costs to follow him. He’s declared his own suffering to come. He’s shared how he’ll die, and how he’ll come back, on the other side of death, with all the glory of Heaven and reward in hand, to give to those who have done with their lives what he’s done with his own.

And then he says this:

“Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Think of how they whispered after that! Was this a threat that Jesus' death was near? Was there relief that maybe they could skip the whole "taking up their crosses" thing? Were they just confused? We'll find out next week!

In the meanwhile, let's allow our drive to receive the reward Jesus has for us remind us that what is true of the Messiah is true for us who follow him, and self-denial is not an option, but a mandate, our way of life, one that God just happens, now and then, to turn into blessing.