

August 30th, 2020

Vicar Jeanette Perrault

Matthew 16:21-28

Sermon on the Passion Prediction from Jesus and Carrying Your Cross

Grace and peace to you on this day as we join together for worship. I feel like I am coming into the middle of a two-part TV episode, where you think everything wraps up neatly and the future looks like it is happily ever after for those involved, but once you see the “tune in next week” you realize the plot is going to twist and it may not be as happy as you expected it to be. Last week, the story began with Jesus asking his disciples to name who he is. And the disciple that has received the most attention, the most airtime, Jesus’ most eager student, Peter, responds saying “you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” And Jesus praises Peter for his answer. He not only gives him a “great job” but a promise and a call, that Peter will be the rock and the foundation that Jesus’ church will be built upon. Truly an honor bestowed upon Peter, and he and the disciples and Jesus live happily ever after. The end. Right?

Well we come to the rest of this particular story today. Although Peter has given the answer Jesus wants to hear, Jesus continues, explaining now what it means for him to be the Messiah. There was more to answer than the one sentence Peter gave and, like any good teacher, Jesus goes deeper into the answer. He starts to teach and show them what his fate is about to look like moving forward, the he must go to Jerusalem, undergo suffering at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. I imagine Jesus standing in front of the disciples as they sit and listen in horror of what he is telling them. And Peter, the hero from the first part of this story, takes one for the team, gets up and pulls Jesus aside, maybe to spare Jesus’ dignity, and says “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Surely if Jesus listened to Peter last time, he must listen to him this time, right?

In our Following Jesus Together discussion this week we talked about Peter’s reaction to Jesus. Why did Peter rebuke Jesus for what he said? And, how would we have felt if we were in the disciples’ position, hearing Jesus share his fate with us? Feelings were shared of being frightened, sad, shocked, and even thoughts on what would happen to us, hearing that our teacher and leader was going to leave us. Would we have to fend for ourselves?

Now I do believe that Peter deeply loved Jesus, as a mentor and a beloved friend, and probably felt many of the same things that we named how we would feel. But I also think that Peter and the rest of the disciples just couldn’t wrap their minds around what Jesus was saying. Jesus just admitted he was the Messiah! And in Jewish understanding, the Messiah was seen to be one who was anointed and to lead the people as a king. Kings don’t walk into battle to suffer, they don’t willingly surrender and give in to being killed. To the disciples and their worldly understanding of a Messiah, this, that Jesus describes, is not what a Messiah is supposed to do. And Peter is the one to remind Jesus of that.

I wonder, if in the seconds between Peter’s rebuke and Jesus’ response, Jesus thought about how nice it would be to not go through with the suffering and death that was to come. I wonder if he was tempted by the idea that he could still do his ministry on earth, but maybe do it a little more safely, not push so many buttons, appease more people, fall more in line with the systems in place. I wonder if he, in his full humanity, was scared and nervous for the path and call that was placed before him by God and then Peter, his first and beloved disciple, was now giving him a way out of it all.

I wonder these things because Jesus’ response to Peter was more than just a little harsh, telling Peter to get behind him, calling Peter Satan and a stumbling block, that Peter is setting his mind on human things and not divine things. It eerily echoes the interaction Jesus has with the devil in the wilderness, recounted earlier in the book of Matthew. In the wilderness the devil is there tempting Jesus to prove he truly is the son of God and enticing Jesus to fall into the temptations of this world. After the third temptation Jesus says “Away with you, Satan.” The same Greek word for Satan that he calls the devil is the same word used to call Peter, meaning adversary or the tempter. Jesus admits to his temptation just by using that name.

Although the same name is used for the devil and Peter, Jesus does not tell Peter to go away like he did the devil in the wilderness. Jesus, instead, tells Peter to get behind him, reminding Peter and the disciples who is still in

the lead and in control. And suddenly, this story turns into a lesson on what it means to truly be a follower of Jesus, showing those there and us today the cost of being a disciple of Christ.

In the words of Jesus, he says that anyone who wants to become his follower must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. This idea of self-denial is tricky, at least for me, to understand correctly. Is Jesus telling me that in order to follow him I must always choose the path of suffering? That I must measure my level of devotion and discipleship to Jesus based on how much pain I endure in life? The more, the better, right? After all, wasn't Jesus sent to suffer and die a painful death? And if I am following Jesus, it makes sense for me to seek out that suffering as well.

Maybe Jesus wasn't the suffering savior, the one who came to earth to only go through great pain and death. Instead, Jesus is the one who shows the world a new way to live. He heals and cares for the sick, seeks justice for the oppressed, lifts up those who are at margins, challenges those who are using their power for wrongdoing, and introduces the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. He teaches kindness, caring for the neighbor, he demonstrates how to love and to share forgiveness. And because of his ministry and because of the life he leads, choosing to push back against the worldly systems and unjust laws in place, as a consequence he endures great suffering. He dies a painful death on the cross not because he sought it out but because he lived his life the way he was called to.

I don't think Jesus is calling us to a life of complete sacrifice and suffering just for the sake of suffering. I don't think Jesus wants us to walk around dragging a heavy cross on our backs, showing it off to all we come across. I also don't think Jesus has called us to live a passive life, a comfortable and safe life, one that just passes us by and leaves things as the status quo. I think Jesus instead wants us to deny the ways we are living that are holding us back from completely and fully following him. They are the systems in place keep us trapped, that feed us lies, that try to convince us to follow them, that tell us they are the better way. The ways of the world make us selfish by not caring for our neighbors, they make us greedy for wanting more than we need, they make us insecure for telling us we are not enough, they make us act out in fear instead of living in faith. These are ways of the world that distract us from who we are created and claimed and called to be.

It is not easy to let go of all the things this world tries to offer us and tempt us with. But Jesus didn't say following him was going to be easy. He says we have to completely lose ourselves for him, lose the distractions and lies and expectations, and there and then we will be found, fully human and alive in the image of God. It is a daily surrender of our lives, where we lay down our control and selfish desires, pick up our cross, and get behind Jesus to follow him.

A part of this story we seem to skip over, is that when Jesus is speaking to the disciples about his fate, explaining where he is to go and what is to happen to him, the last thing he says is that he will be raised on the third day. Jesus knows there is much suffering and much death in his life. But he also knows that new life will come again. It is easy to skip that piece like Peter did once hearing about the suffering and death that will be endured. And it's easy then to talk ourselves out of following Jesus, becoming distracted with excuses and all the reasons not to deny ourselves and fully follow him. But we cannot forget the abundant life that comes after the suffering and death promised to both Jesus as well as you and me. Our stories and lives may not be fairytales, ending with "and they lived happily ever after." But my friends and siblings in Christ, we receive the promise of new and abundant life because of Christ, where we get to follow him, and we get to live. Amen.