

Jesus and Peter, Part II
13th Sunday after Pentecost
September 2 and 3, 2023

²¹From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord!^s This shall never happen to you.” ²³But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me/(a trap thou art to me). For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” ²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

Dear Friends in Christ,

High school football coaches often say or do memorable things, and ours was no exception. His name was Ken Bakkegard, a very short and slight man, but he had a way of getting your attention and keeping it. My top five memories include

- Him grabbing me by my face mask, looking me in the eyes, and giving me a piece of his mind
- When tied 0-0 at half time with the dreaded Milnor Bison, “A tie is like kissing your sister.”
- Team chanting, “Blood makes the grass grow.”
- Team chanting, “Rah rah ree, kick him in the knee, rah rah ras, kick him in the other knee.”
- When drilling us for three or more hours of pre-season practice, “no pain no gain.”

No pain, no gain. Isn't that how every good coach rallies his or her troops? No pain, no gain. The importance of discipline and hard work, the rewards of blood, sweat, and tears, the value of sacrifice and duty and commitment - aren't these the lessons all good parents and grandparents want the next generations to learn well? Now that I reflect on it, high school athletics were a turning point in my life - and I would say in the lives of millions, a time when we started to learn those significant life lessons.

No effort, no result. No guts, no glory. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. No hard work, no success. The only bad workouts are those that didn't happen. First the rain and then the rainbow. No pressure, no diamonds. Eat bitter, taste sweet.

James invited Christians to **consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.**

Paul writes to all who are standing in God's grace that **we rejoice not only in the hope of God's glory but also in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, etc.**

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus was at a turning point in His ministry. And He was now teaching as clearly as He before there was a resurrection, there had to be a death by crucifixion. Before there could be joy on a Sunday morning, weeping would have to be endured throughout the evening.

Two lessons we would learn today, as we listen to Jesus and Peter for a second weekend in a row. Two lessons about what it means to be following Christ into His suffering, death, and resurrection.

Following Christ is a Journey, not just a Destination

Last weekend, we saw Peter the blurter getting it right - in answer to our Lord's question, "Who do you say that I am?" He nailed it, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." At this point, Jesus commended him and promised to build His Church wherever His Name was confessed as Savior and Lord. No doubt, at this point, there was a sense of euphoria in the group.

Picture the euphoria when a young man and woman tell each other for the first time that they love each other. Words that took over and changed everything. It's almost like there's no going back at that point.

For Peter and the others, this was that moment. This was going to be amazing! We agree with Peter. We love you and we think the world of you and we will follow you wherever you want to lead us.

Soon after, Jesus begins to give them the hard truths about what lies ahead. The next stop would include Jesus suffering all that He was appointed to suffer. Jesus would be crucified in agonizing fashion until He was dead and buried. The public

humiliation would be beyond imagination, but He would in fact rise up on the third day.

But as soon as he hears about suffering and death, Peter the blurter gets it wrong. Dreadfully wrong. Instead of listening carefully and letting it soak into the deepest recesses of his heart that Jesus was that Lamb of God who was appointed to be slaughtered as a way of taking away the sins of the world, Peter took Jesus aside. He insists that this must never happen to Jesus.

At which point Jesus squelched Peter as one would crush a serpent raising its ugly head to bite. We see that Peter had only heard what Jesus said about suffering and death and had not grasped the good news of resurrection.

Peter was failing to see what many fail to see, which is the damning power of sin which made the cross a necessity. Peter began, but never finished explaining his theory of how this ministry should take place. Jesus didn't ask him why he was thinking this way. He gave Peter no time to explain.

When He barked, "Get behind me Satan," he indicated that Peter had unwittingly made himself an agent of Satan. His words of protest put him, for the moment, on the archrival's team. Peter may have meant well, but he was, in fact, blabbering the thoughts of man instead of setting His mind on the things of God.

Life is a journey, Jesus was saying. If anyone would follow me, get ready to deny yourself and take up your own cross, and follow me.

The language of the Christian life as a journey is prominent in the Baptism liturgy where parents and Godparents and congregations pledge to help the baptized spend his life renouncing the devil, renouncing all his works, and renouncing all his ways.

Life as a journey language is prominent in the Rite of Confirmation when confirmands promise to spend the rest of their lives renouncing the devil and all his works and ways. When they promise to spend their lives hearing the Word of God and receiving the Lord's Supper faithfully. When they vow to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it.

Life as a journey language is prominent in our marriage vows, as brides and grooms look each other in the eyes and commit to having and holding each other from that day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.

Following Christ is a Pilgrimage, not a Tour

Perhaps you have been on a tour, where you have trusted a travel agency to do all the planning. They take care of your luggage. They put you on air conditioned buses and ferry you around to all the right sights. They pay the entrance fees for your tickets so you don't have to stand in line and suffer the heat of the day. You stay safe and comfortable and dry, while others do the sweating for you. That's a tour.

A true pilgrimage isn't like that. Pilgrimages are person and firsthand, something you have to do yourself. This is what Jesus is teaching His disciples in today's Gospel lesson. There would be no watching God's plans work themselves out from a safe distance. This would not be a spectator sport, where they would be watching and cheering Jesus on from the sidelines.

Harry Emerson Fosdick tells a story of a storm off the Atlantic coast. A ship foundered on the rocks, and the Coast Guard was called out. The captain ordered the lifeboat to be launched, but one of the crew members protested, "Sir," the wind is offshore, the tide is running out. We can launch the boat, but we'll never get back!

To which the captain replied, Launch the lifeboat, men, we have to go out. That is our duty. But we don't have to come back."

This is one of our Lord's strange teachings today. The one who wants to protect himself, the one who wants to hide herself, the one who wishes to guard himself carefully, will never find the meaning of life. **Whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.**

This is why Jesus was so angry with Peter. Peter wanted Jesus to take the easy way out. He wanted Jesus to save his own life, to guard his own safety, to keep his body intact. But how could the Son of God not do what the Son of God came to do? How could the Savior of the world not do what was necessary to pay the price demanded by a righteous God for the sins of the world? How could the Lamb of God not submit Himself to what sacrificial lambs are, by definition, destined to do?

There is a legend told by secular historians about Peter in his last days. It was a day of widespread persecution of Christians. The Christians of Rome were telling Peter to leave town. That he was too valuable. That he needed to go to a safe place and preach the Gospel. According to the legends, only a few days later, Nero

had Peter in custody. He was sent out to die, and when the soldiers took Peter to the site of execution, Peter had one last request.

That he might be crucified upside down. That he wasn't worthy to die in the same way as His Lord. And so, according to legend, they nailed him to his cross upside down.

Life is a pilgrimage, Jesus would teach us today, not a tour. It is lived in the footsteps of the Master. It is pursued in the company of fellow travelers of a like mind. It is a road that requires self-denial, picking up crosses and carrying them.

On our bad days, we will take the path of least resistance, we will be all about staying comfortable, and there will be a nagging feeling in our souls that something is missing.

On our good days, we will keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and by His grace, we will endure the pain and survive the storms of life, with important lessons learned.

On our best days, we will go looking for those neighbors on the verge of giving up, looking for struggling travelers who need to be helped and befriended in the Name of Jesus, and helping the next generation to learn what Laura Story sings about in her song, "Blessings."

***... 'Cause what if your blessings come through raindrops?
What if Your healing comes through tears?
What if a thousand sleepless nights
Are what it takes to know You're near?
And what if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise?***

In Jesus' Name. Amen.