

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
September 3, 2023 – The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 16:21-28
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Let's look at this morning's Gospel reading and its record of a disturbing encounter between Jesus and Peter. In last Sunday's reading from Matthew, we heard that Peter had correctly identified Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). And Jesus then called Peter the rock on which his church would be built. Now Jesus is calling Peter a stumbling block! Why? Because when Jesus began to explain to the disciples what it meant to be the Messiah – to suffer and die at the hands of the people in Jerusalem with political, economic, and religious power – Peter could not accept this truth. "God forbid it, Lord!"

We can understand Peter's objection. Thinking in human terms, the idea of a suffering, dying Messiah is absurd. Peter expected the Messiah to be God's strong agent who had come to save and liberate God's people, not be killed by the oppressors. Peter cannot accept the idea that Jesus will be God's strong Messiah through the weakness of suffering or that Jesus will liberate and save God's people through losing his own life. Peter has set his mind on human things, not divine things.

At that moment Peter was like Satan who had tempted Jesus in the wilderness with a vision of having "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor" (Matthew 4:8) if only Jesus would worship Satan instead of God. Jesus refused Satan then, and he now refuses the temptation to avoid the way of the cross. "Get behind me, Satan!" The Greek text may be understood as "get out of the way" if you mean to be a stumbling block in the path, or it may be heard as a command to "fall in" behind me, or "follow me."

Jesus then instructs his disciples about what it means to follow him: the cross is for Jesus' followers as well as for himself. Jesus is not instructing his disciples to seek out suffering. Throughout his ministry Jesus acted to alleviate human suffering of all kinds. What Jesus is suggesting is that suffering tends to be part of the path of following him. Jesus then teaches that the cross is the way of life, the way to life. This makes no sense to our ordinary human understanding. We must understand Jesus' teaching not through the eyes of the world but through what vision we have of God's kingdom.

Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Following Jesus means focusing on the needs of others, especially those who are most afflicted and in greatest need. As one biblical commentator wrote, "Cross bearers are dropouts in the school of self-promotion. They do not pick up their crosses as a means for personal fulfillment, career advancement, or self-expression; rather they 'deny themselves' and pick up their crosses, like their Lord, because of the needs of other people" (Thomas G. Long, "Matthew", page 190).

Most Christians do not literally die for their faith, though many do – including some of the "famous" saints like St. Peter. Most Christians carry crosses of quiet self-sacrifice and compassionate service to the needs of others. In the mind of God, this is the way of finding true life. When Jesus says, "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done," this is a promise given to his faithful followers. What we give to others for the sake of Christ and the kingdom of God will be repaid by God, with abundant life and eternal life with God.

But in Matthew's Gospel we are reminded that there is another part of the message about when the Son of Man comes with his angels, another aspect of the promised "repayment." And that is judgment.

Twenty years ago, when I was in seminary and taking a class on the New Testament, our assignment was to choose one of the parables of Jesus and do an in-depth analysis of the parable – called "exegesis" in the jargon of the field. We were also required to present our research to the class, beginning with an explanation of why we chose that parable.

A classmate of mine chose the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25 (31-46). He chose that parable because he struggled with the idea that people would be judged by God for their failures. I thought that was very interesting because, like me, my classmate was a "late vocation." He entered seminary after retiring from being a homicide detective in New Jersey. That occupation was surely about holding criminals accountable for their actions. I wondered why he could not see God doing the same thing, but he didn't explain.

In the vision of God's judgment that we find in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, the Son of Man separates people into two categories. On one hand are the righteous people who gave food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, and clothing to the naked, who cared for the sick and visited those in prison. To these righteous people, the Son of Man says, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." On the other hand are those who failed to do these works of mercy to the least of their brothers and sisters. To these, the Son of Man says, "you that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." I think we might say that Jesus is exaggerating the punishment of the unrighteous to make his point strong, but I don't think we can ignore the idea that God will hold us accountable for our behavior, that there will be judgment.

But we also believe that God will have mercy on us, even though we fail. In my New Testament class, I chose the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:12-14). In that parable, a shepherd has a hundred sheep. When one of them goes astray, he leaves the 99 sheep to search for and find the one lost sheep. The shepherd rejoices when the lost sheep is found. Jesus comments, "So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones [disciples of Jesus] should be lost." (I'll let you speculate on why I might have chosen that parable!)

We believe that God has compassion for us, especially in our weakness. We trust that God has mercy on us when we turn to God and God's ways, especially when we return after we have gone astray. We don't deserve God's mercy. We cannot undo the wrongs we have done or offer God any compensation for turning away from God's way of love. All we can do is turn back, with hope, trusting in God's mercy. We believe that our salvation depends on God's mercy. In the burial service, when we commit the soul of the person who has died to God, we say: "May his [or her] soul, and the souls of all the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace" (The Book of Common Prayer, page 502).

When we recognize our own weakness and are aware of our own need for God's mercy, we know how important it is to extend mercy to others, especially by responding with compassion and love in action to people who suffer. God's mercy is the pattern for us to follow. We must hold in tension Jesus' teaching about judgment and Jesus' teaching about mercy. Perhaps the recollection of God's judgment can serve us best if it leads us to help those who travel with us on this often-difficult road of life. By God's mercy and in Jesus' name. Amen.