

Finding Life through Suffering and Death

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 23
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 15:15-21; Psalm 26:1-8;
Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jenny loved her husband Joe very much. He was everything she thought a wonderful husband should be. But he did have one trait that she mostly found endearing, but at times really made her very angry. You see, Joe liked to tell Jenny that what she was doing or what she had done could be, in his view, greatly improved.

Just like the afternoon when they were preparing to have friends over for dinner. Jenny had baked a delicious cake for desert and was just putting the finishing touches on the decoration. “Oh, honey,” Joe enthused, “what a great cake. You know if you cut a slice out of it and put it on the table like that it would look as though it had just come right out of *Good Housekeeping* magazine!”

“Joe, dear,” she said icily, “no one serves company with a cake that already has a slice taken out of it. And you’re just going to have to wait for your piece like everyone else!”

You know, the very human trait of offering advice as to how things might be improved has a very long history. All of us at one time or another believe that we have expert advice to offer. Just so Peter.

Just like us when we think we know best how things ought to go, Peter seeks to revise God’s plan of salvation and to instruct Jesus as to how best He ought to participate in it. After all, Jesus’ announcement of His forthcoming arrest, His suffering at the hands of the Pharisees, and His being killed as a result is quite overwhelming. Even in Peter’s time, such a program was a terrible public relations ploy. In the face of it, Peter doesn’t even hear the announcement that Jesus will be resurrected three days after His execution.

What really bothers Peter is what Jesus says: that He will journey to Jerusalem where He will encounter suffering, trial, and death at the hands of the very authorities who ought to recognize him – the church. To which, in his characteristically impulsive way, Peter immediately sets about attempting to dissuade Jesus from taking the trip and so avoiding the possibility of such a disastrous outcome. In an instant, Jesus and Peter are on opposite sides of a conflict. Suddenly colleagues have become opponents. “You are a stumbling block to me,” Jesus says, “You’re setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Peter, who just last week received a special revelation from God, becomes mired in a human way of thinking. The one earlier blessed by Jesus, is now called “Satan.” The rock on which the church is to be built has become a stumbling block for Jesus. Wow!

What has Peter done that is so terribly wrong? According to Jesus, Peter simply begins to think the wrong way. To think like every other human being. The imagination that was once attuned to the divine revelation becomes attuned to the very real and human way of thinking. He cannot bring himself to contemplate that suffering and death are part of the calling of Jesus, any more than they are part of the calling of those who seek to be faithful followers of Jesus.

Peter attempts exclude the possibility of being vulnerable; he tries to turn away from what is distasteful, and he endeavors to do what he can to see Jesus through to a successful Messiahship – at least in Peter’s eyes. But then, isn’t that something like the way we all think? Jesus’ words seem, in this day and age to be somewhat extreme, don’t they? We really don’t expect to be put on trial by the religious authorities for our beliefs, do we? Of course we don’t. We certainly don’t expect to find ourselves tortured by the government because we follow Christ. And as for dying for the faith, being executed for belief, really it’s out of the question, isn’t it?

So what is it that Jesus is getting at? He calls those who seek to follow Him, who try to be faithful to Him, who take up the call to discipleship, to a new and radical form of obedience. Uh oh, obedience. That’s a really tough one for us, isn’t it? For us Americans who take enormous pride in being independent? Obedience to Jesus when it’s in conflict with our human ways of thinking? My goodness! I know we all think of ourselves as fairly good people, and that is true, but the question the gospel puts to us is, no matter whether you’re a good person or not, it doesn’t count! The question is: are we obedient to Christ? Are we regularly in worship? Are we daily in devotion? Have we the correct and faithful financial priorities? Do we live as clear witnesses to our faith?

Of course it is easy to think that we do, especially when we so easily see in others convincing evidence of their lack of obedience. But what is at stake here is not developing ways to correct others, but to come to a clear understanding of our own quality of obedience to Christ. Are we really attempting to live, every day, as His faithful followers – in our dealings with our families and in the ways we undertake our work? Are we really ready to be honest, not brutally honest in ways that create pain and harm, but honest nonetheless. Do we live with integrity as the result of our having become Christ’s men and women? You see, it is when we begin to take our lives seriously in the light of what Christ means to us that we can expect to encounter real suffering. And yes, even death. Honesty and integrity can exact a terrible price in a society and culture like ours that often lives by “turning a blind eye” and functioning with “a wink and a nod.”

Have we finally grasped the fact that there is no way to Easter, other than through Holy Week and Good Friday? Or would we rather avoid those days and get straight to the party of Easter? Do we realize that having celebrated the incarnation and the resurrection, it is essential to understand that Christ is coming again? Or, do we just skip Advent and get right into the Christmas spirit as quickly as we can?

And, finally, do we really actually realize that we are called to be ready to die? I suspect that there are very few men and women who live that way – our police officers, our firefighters, and the men and women who serve in the arm forces of this country. But we all need to be ready to die. First, to die to our own self-interest and ideas, and finally to lay down our life. It’s only

when we fearlessly face up to these realities that we realize with Peter and the disciples, that what is true for the Messiah is true for us.

In real life I think it might look something like this. Two West Point cadets who were buddies, one of them trying to be faithful to Christ, had very different abilities and talents. One was athletic and intelligent, while the other was an average without much athletic ability. The second young man had a problem which the first did not. To graduate from West Point, seniors must be able to pass a physical fitness test which includes push-ups and sit-ups, and a two-mile run within a set period of time. The cadets took the test on the same day. For the first cadet, the test was a breeze, it was absolutely no problem. For the second one, however, it was a major disaster. He did pass the first part of the fitness test, the sit-ups and such. But the two-mile run was next to impossible for him. He had never run the event within the allotted time, and he had no reason to believe that he could do it now. As he was running, he was not full of confidence or hope, and it showed. The further along he went, the more he felt sapped of energy and strength and just about the time he was ready to give up, the first cadet noticed what was happening to his friend. He decided to help him. So he slowed down, waited for the second cadet to catch up to him, and then proceeded to encourage him down the track with shouts of, "You can do it!" "Go for it!" "You're gonna make it!" The second cadet did not respond with any great burst of speed, but he didn't give up either. With the first cadet running alongside him, he continued to plod along, pushing himself for all he was worth. The first cadet kept yelling and encouraging, and the second cadet kept running. And with all the energy he could muster, he finally crossed the finish line with the first cadet at his side. The second cadet was totally exhausted. It was a great moment for both men.

There was only one thing wrong – both of them failed the test. So, the first cadet discovered the cost of discipleship. He gave his all to help his friend accomplish something that he could never have accomplished on his own. And it cost him. Just as it cost Jesus for us.

Discipleship always costs. But did you catch what Jesus said in the gospel about the paradox between winning living faithfully? Jesus presented the disciples with a paradox: "For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Peter wanted Jesus to establish the kingdom on earth without any sacrifice, without any cost. He thought of the good times shared with Jesus and hoped that those good times would continue indefinitely. Jesus tried to tell Peter and the disciples that He was going to Jerusalem and He was going to suffer, die and be raised again. They were visibly upset. "This must never happen to you," Peter said. He misunderstood. What they failed to understand was that Jesus was a model to follow. Jesus would suffer and die. And in dying, he would have life.

When we give of ourselves for Christ's sake, when we witness to our faith, and even when we place ourselves at risk, it's then that we will find life. And that, beloved, is the Gospel, the good news.

Amen.

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