

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*September 3, 2023*

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## **The Cross We Bear**

Matthew 16:21-28

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost/ Lectionary 22

I know not everyone was with us last week. So I'm going to do a quick review because the Gospel lesson from last week is intrinsically connected to the Gospel reading for this week. Jesus is with his disciples, walking through a Roman regional capital, Caesarea Philippi. And he checks in with them. First, about how he is being perceived by others. What is the scuttlebutt about him? Who do others say that he is? And secondly, about how he is being perceived by the disciples themselves? Who do YOU say that I am?

In front of the symbols of the Roman empire, in front of the idols of Rome, Peter, in a moment of triumph in his faith story proclaims, "You are the messiah. The Son of the living God." Jesus praises him for his faithful answer and tells him that he is the Rock on which the church will be built.

Our text for this morning immediately follows that moment. Boy, how things have changed. In one moment, Peter is the rock on which the church will be built. In the next, Jesus calls Peter "Satan." I can only imagine Peter's whiplash. The foundation stone has become the stumbling stone. While he gets the answer to Jesus' question correct, he doesn't grasp what his answer means.

He can't grasp the idea of his friend – the messiah – going to his death on a cross. You see, the cross too was a symbol of Rome – the Romans made sure of that. The cross is a method of torture and execution – intended just as much as a warning to others through this brutal and excruciating public execution. It was reserved for political criminals, enemies of the state. It was also reserved as a method of execution reserved only for Rome and its officials. The Jewish authorities had no power to crucify – though other means of capital punishment were open to them. Only Rome could crucify someone.

My wife and I recently watched *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Captain Jack Sparrow makes his entrance on a sinking ship – well, to call it a ship is more than generous to say the least – it’s basically a rowboat with a sail. He’s bailing water frantically, desperately trying to get this rowboat to the harbor. And then he pauses. In a moment of silence and respect. The skeletal remains of two captured pirates are displayed above the bay from the nooses they were hung from – with a sign “Pirates Ye Be Warned.” Both the public hangings and the display of the bodies function to both rid the Caribbean of pirates. And to warn those who try to follow in that path.

Crucifixion functions in the same way – and in a more intense manner. In this terribly violent and lengthy public execution, Rome rids themselves of the threat to their own power. And warns people to stay in their place. Crucifixion was one of the tools to ensure the Pax Romana – the Peace of Rome.

How in the world could this be the fate of the person who is the Messiah? The Son of the Living God? How can the Son of the Living God die? And die in THAT way. That cannot be where this road is leading. Heaven forbid it. And if that is the fate for the Messiah – what will be our fate? That’s not where I want my story to end either. It is hard to blame Peter for his reaction. I cannot imagine that I would do any better, given the same information he had to work with.

Jesus was willing to turn toward to Jerusalem – with all of the dangers and risks that came with it. This is exactly what Jesus came for. Pastor Emmy Kegler, an ELCA pastor in Minneapolis, writes this in her book, *One Coin Found*:

**Jesus suffered and died not because he was a sinner but because his full and honest truth made all those in power recoil in fear.** Certainly something more cosmic could and would happen in that death, but the story itself bore the truth: Jesus died because the religious and political elite hated him. He died because he intentionally aligned himself with those on the edges. He placed himself among the poor who did not have enough bread for an afternoon on a hillside, among the tax collectors who colluded with the empire, among simple smelly fishermen, among those whose skin puckered with leprous scars or the violence of the demons that

possessed them, among women who were Samaritans or bleeding or caught in the act of adultery or foolish enough to sit at his feet and dare to learn. He dared to declare the kingdom of God was at hand and that it was among the last and least. He claimed titles for himself that a carpenter's son from backwater Nazareth had no business speaking: Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God.

Emmy continues:

I needed this. I needed someone to tell me that all my differences, my impossibilities, my queerness, everything in me that pushed me to the edge of society was not going to prevent my inclusion. I needed to know that all the barriers the world would put up between me and God were worthy of crossing. I needed to hear that no matter how despised and rejected, no matter how acquainted with suffering, no matter how oppressed and afflicted, I was still worth something. The story was that my own sin was the chasm, but what I saw was a culture and a church happy to dig that ditch for me and drop me into it. In Jesus's suffering and death, I heard it declared that no matter what evil and devastation the powers of this world could cook up to silence a message of mercy and love, God was going to find a way to cross it and bring me back. (Emmy Kegler, *One Coin Found*, 39-41).

And God, isn't that good news??

That's what it means for Jesus to be the messiah. Jesus brings with him the kind of love that liberates. The kind of love that brings deliverance. The kind of love that brings us back to God. Again. And Again. And again. And that kind of life and ministry and love leads us to the cross. And Jesus lives that kind of life anyway, knowing that that is exactly where this kind of life – the kind of life that lives out the love of God - leads.

I titled this sermon, "The Cross We Bear." Because Jesus asks us to go there. Before I go to what that means, I want to take a moment with what it doesn't mean. So often, we hear the phrase "my cross to bear" in ways that deny our inherent God-belovedness. It has come to refer to any problem, or unpleasant or painful situation or person that you have to accept and deal with.

It has been used to keep people in abusive situations or in relationship with abusive people. It has been a phrase used in unaffirming contexts – encouraging LGBTQIA+ folks to deny who they are – their sexuality, their gender, etc. – and the struggle resulting struggle to fit into a heteronormative world. It has been used to talk about folks' struggles with addiction. Somehow we've made God someone who seemingly enjoys the suffering of others. Some cruel test of faith. And just gives it out as the cross folks must bear. That is so far from the loving God I meet in Jesus.

When Jesus tells those who follow him to take up our crosses, he's asking us to take up the kind of life Jesus lived – centered in the love of God. It is a call to stand with and live life with the people the world would rather forget, would rather hide, would rather ignore. Jesus wants to find us standing with the lost, the lonely, the immigrant/ foreigner/ stranger, the imprisoned, the hungry, the thirsting, the outcast, the marginalized, the dehumanized. Even when it comes at a cost to us. Jesus is calling us to the real world implications of Jesus' life, ministry – the real world implications of the coming of the kingdom of God into this world. It is a call to see the ways of the world and the pain that those ways brings, and it is a call to stand with those who are harmed.

We're called to be theologians of the cross – calling a thing what it is, calling racism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, for what they are – an affront to God and to God's people. We're called to pursue justice, peace, healing, and wholeness for our lives and for our world. We're called to be Christ for our neighbor. We're called to this, even if it leads to our own crosses (a literal possibility for the earliest Christians). Even if it leads to our own rejection – in our faith communities, in our friend and family groups.

But we do this following the Jesus who, to quote Audrey West “puts his life on the line ahead of all who follow him.” Jesus faced the worst of what this world can do. And on that cross we're shown the kind of love that continually brings us back. It is only by that love that we first received that we can do it at all. Amen.