

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost
“Three Commands for the Confessor of Christ” (Matthew 16:24)
September 3, 2023
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our text for this 14th Sunday after Pentecost is from our Gospel reading, Matthew 16:24.

“ Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”

So far the text...

Last week we heard the verses immediately preceding today’s Gospel. We heard Jesus asking the question, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” And the responses were varied. Some say Elijah, some say John the Baptist, or a prophet. There are many answers floating out there in today’s world about who people believe Jesus to be, even if they believe He existed at all.

One of the joys that I have experienced during this construction process has been the conversations I’ve had with the various workers as they’ve each come to do their part in the remodeling of the classrooms and restrooms. There have been electricians, plumbers, AC technicians, laborers, craftsmen of cabinets, technicians laying cabling, painters, tile workers...etc. Each has a specialized area that they have dedicated themselves to and honed their skills to become good at. Each are working for a living to provide for their families.

And yet, though each of them has a title according to their craft, each of them also have or do not have a title in relation to Christ. They are either sons of God who come after Jesus, confess Him to be their Savior or not. In the midst of the construction, God has given all of opportunities to shine the light of why we are here at Immanuel. How do we answer the question, “Who is Jesus? And what that means to you?”

It has been a joy for me to hear the humble confession, “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God” from the lips of various workers. And where this confession is

absent, God gives the opportunity to lead the conversation to spiritual matters – wherever each of us comes into contact with an unbeliever. For every person, in whatever profession, has this in common. We all have a soul. And every person’s soul is precious, eternal, loved by God and paid for by blood of Christ on the cross.

Now whether a person knows this is true or not, is the next question. For to believe in Christ, who He is and what He has done is to “come after Him.” It is to receive all that Jesus has won by His death and resurrection – eternal life for the soul and a resurrection of the body!

But the person who would not come after Jesus but only “come after” what the world offers, all of its temporal gains, would lose one’s soul eternally. So our Gospel reading clearly tells of the terrible alternative of not coming after Jesus.

“6 For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

What is Jesus telling us is at stake for every man, woman and child? The soul!

For that reason, the soul’s confession of who Jesus is - the Christ, the Son of the living God, is the most important confession in one’s life. It is the rock, the confession of Jesus Himself, upon which Jesus builds His church.

This Peter answered. **“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.”**

To know Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, and not just a decent man is a gift of faith given by God Himself. But now, Jesus, reveals to the disciples what the blessed work of the Messiah is – how the Christ redeems the souls of every person from sin, death and the devil. Simply put, Jesus reveals the Gospel – Christ Crucified and risen.

So today’s Gospel began: **“From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.”**

To believe in the Christ also absolutely includes believing in His work of salvation – in the Way that God chose to save all mankind.

Jesus must suffer and be killed. Jesus emphasizes the word, “must”. There is no other way. God must die in Jerusalem at the hands of the leaders of the church.

These details were new to the disciples and took them by surprise. No, no, no. Peter didn’t like this plan at all. He took Jesus aside and acted like God Himself and rebuked Him, **“saying, ‘Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!’”**

But this is the only Way. It must happen or all mankind is lost. Anyone who would try to thwart God’s saving mission is a stumbling block and follows not the thoughts of God but the plans of the devil. For that reason, Jesus calls Peter, who is blessed to know Jesus as his Christ, “Satan”. It is that egregious, that appalling and horrendous! For at stake are the souls of every man, woman and child. Jesus Must be killed!

But also notice that Jesus gives much hope at the same time which appears to not be noticed by Peter. Jesus will be raised on the third day. He must be raised also for Jesus wins the victory over sin, death and the devil!

And whoever comes after Jesus confesses not only who Jesus is, but His gracious, saving work on the cross and His resurrection! It is the Good News. It is the Gospel that gives life to our souls. And as believers in Jesus, our new spirit is given three commands. Deny oneself, take up one’s cross and follow Jesus.

The English phrasing of our text uses the word “let”. **“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”**

But there is no mistake about this. This is not optional. “Let him” means “he must”. For if one is a Christian, one must deny oneself, take up his or her cross and follow Jesus. The Greek verbs, in fact, use the grammar of a command – an imperative. These are three important commands given to every Christian.

First, deny oneself. What does that mean? Deny your sinful flesh. Deny the fulfillment of the temptations of the flesh. Deny the sinful thoughts that you could

save yourself by your own works or deeds. No! Christ must suffer and die, not you. Christ's work comes before you. You come after Him with faith in His work. To deny oneself is, simply put, to repent – acknowledge my lost condition because of my sin and believe in the One who denied Himself perfectly for your salvation. He never gave into temptation, but offered His sinless self on the cross for you.

Therefore, the next command is to take up one's cross. This is, of course, not Jesus' cross, for you and I could never carry this. Nor are we told to choose our cross, but to take up the cross that God chooses for you. Simply put, the Christian cross is what Christians suffer as Christians, in their living of their Christian faith in this world.

**“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:10)**

The Christian cross is temporary. It is but for a brief moment that we endure the afflictions of this world for Christ sake – that we are counted worthy to endure them. And the Christian gladly takes up the cross which he or she knows is not too heavy because God gives it to him or her for the strengthening of one's faith. The Christian relies not on one's own righteousness, but gladly comes to know better and better the righteousness of Christ that counts for his or her salvation – the righteousness that has opened up heaven – the keys of forgiveness of the Gospel. Word and Sacraments are so much more cherished as one carries one's cross for in the Lord's Supper and Baptism, one is strengthened to keep one's thoughts on the thoughts of God. And first and foremost that keeps us focused on the eternal prize of the kingdom of heaven. The cross is temporary but eternal life and glory are forever. The Christian has these great gifts even now, but is kept humble by the cross so as to not forget them and lose them!

And finally, “follow Me”. One does not follow self. One does not follow one's sinful desires, but follows Christ to eternal gain. To be a great Christian leader is to be a great follower of Christ!

“20 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

These are our lifelong commands which in Christ are for our eternal good and in which we have life in Jesus. Yes, we enjoy the temporal blessings of the world which God gives to us. But we look forward to the eternal blessings God has prepared for us and not forsake them for the world and lose them. Deny self – follow Him who died for yourself, take up your cross, for Jesus has carried your greatest burden that you could not carry on His cross, and follow Him, every day to eternal life. Amen.

“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)