

“Spending Time with Jesus”
13th Sunday after Pentecost (Pr 17) – August 30, 2020 – Matthew 16:21-35/A

Grace and peace to you from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I was thinking the other day about the start of school this year - how different it is - and how differently it will be remembered when we look back on the fall of 2020, year that will stand out when we look back, just simply because it was so different than the others. When I was growing up, it seems like the first writing assignment of every new year was, inevitably, ***“How I spent my summer vacation.”***

As a kid, I always spent my summer vacation the same way... doing what we did as a family every summer: we went to horse shows – week after week – summer after summer. I could have turned in the same paper year after year, because that was always how I spent my summer vacation. Until I got old enough to be on my own, and our horses were no longer competing, I never had a choice. I never got to decide how I would “spend” the time I was allotted for summer vacation. So, I have been thinking about that word “spent” – and how we use our resources – especially in the midst of a global pandemic that pretty much shut down our normal summer vacation experiences, and how we are all choosing to “spend” our lives within this new reality. Regardless of the setting, we are called to be good stewards of all we have and all we are.

Today’s Gospel story offers a number of life examples that might help us consider some ways to “spend wisely.” We are picking up where we left off last week, when Jesus’ asked about the word on the street about him. *“But who do you say that I am?”* It was Peter, who so bravely stepped out and spent his secret idea about Jesus, and then he was rewarded for his proclamation. *“Well done, Peter!”* He had spent his time with Jesus wisely.

Now Jesus knows that they know what he knows. Cautioning them that it is not yet time to reveal that he is the Messiah, Jesus shares the first of three so-called “passion predictions,” that is, how the next chapter of his life will unfold. This is a turning point in Matthew’s telling of Jesus’ ministry, and it begins with the words, *“and from that time on”* which were also used earlier to mark the beginning of Jesus’ teaching ministry. Now those same words issue in the part where Jesus will put into his own life-actions, all the lessons he has been talking about thus far.

“and from that time on...he began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” In other words, this is the part where we learn how Jesus is spending his life among us.

Unfortunately, Peter, the Star Pupil of earlier in this encounter, flunks the final. Peter goes from Rock to Stumbling Block, hearing only up to the word “killed,” and too shocked to hear the rest. *“God forbid that this should happen to you, Lord!”* could have easily been spoken by any of us. Just when we invest, just when we fall in love, just when things look like they will get back to normal, the roof caves in on us. We’ve given up so much to be with you, to follow you, and now you are going to die? It’s not fair!

And then something worse than choosing self over God happens to Peter. Jesus rebukes him. *“Get behind me, you tempter! You are getting in the way of the kingdom of God, by thinking only of yourself and not of the world God loves.”* Have you ever been rebuked? How did it feel to know you had disappointed someone who might have been your hero,

a respected elder, a beloved mentor, or the love of your life? Were their expectations of you, realistic? Had they set the bar too high? Are your expectations of you too high? What is it (do you think) that God wants from you?

Did you ever think about the fact that Jesus didn't really need the disciples, the followers, the crowds? In fact, Jesus could have done everything he did without any of them. They weren't there to do for him (although I'm sure he delighted in their company,) they were there to learn how to spend their lives – and not just learn it - but live it. By doing so, they and we, can be a part of showing the world hope through God's love that comes without strings, without limits.

How did Jesus show them what he was telling them? Sacrifice. He spent his life, his choices, his rights for you. He surrendered his power, he gave in to the world, so that we might see what sacrifice can accomplish. Transformation.

When Jesus said, "*take up your cross*" what do you think the disciples heard? Certainly not what we hear, since for us the cross is something quite different. For us it is a symbol of death to new life, but for them...for them it just meant death; execution by the political occupiers known as Rome. To take up your cross meant that you were on the way to being crucified; you were as good as dead, you were one of those guys on death row known as a "dead man walking" (or in these days, "walking dead.") To take up your cross meant that you were already dying.

So this is not the place in scripture where we can take some slight comfort in knowing that our pains and burdens and troubles of this world are "just my cross to bear." This is something much deeper, much more profound than endurance. This invitation is for a total re-orientation of identity. What Jesus is asking is whether or not we are willing to die for something bigger than ourselves. (pandemic)

On the surface, it seems so easy to say yes, I'll follow you. But if we let the invitation sink in and really begin to understand what Jesus is asking, we most probably pull back in fear. Just like Peter, we are SCARED STIFF, because deep down we know that we cling to our selves with all the power that is in us. We do not want to lose control, we do not want to give our rights away, and we do not want to have to sacrifice anything that we have worked for, earned or accumulated. But nowhere else in scripture do we get pinned to the wall quite so skillfully as we do right here.

We stand in Peter's shoes and try to get God to affirm where we are and who we are and the direction that we have chosen for ourselves. We protest that we have lived well and provided the best we can for our families. We protect our choices for security and comfort and rationalize that as long as we're not hurting anyone, we are leading good Christian lives.

And yet we know the lie of that, because each of us knows how deeply we yearn for the connection with God that feeds our souls, and nourishes our spirits. How desperately we want that closer connection which comes only with the cost of following. (Does this make you fearful? Is the cost too high? Are we condemned to be "in bondage to sin such that we cannot free ourselves...?") All the talk of spending yourself for others you might not even know is way too much to ask. And we see that we are not able to bear the burden of the cross. We simply can't do it.

But God doesn't hold that against us. God knows we cannot, and loves us just the same. God looks at each one of us with the pride we feel when we watch one of our own do something wonderful, or profound, or self-less. We can only see them through the eyes of

the love we feel for them. Oh, it is good Lord, to be here today, to be reminded that our lives are ultimately NOT dependent on our wise expenditures, but about being a small part of something much, much bigger. "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples..." WHO would be doing the spending, and WHO would take up the cross for you. But then, we also know what happened next: God took the darkness and shook it with New Life – real life – abundant, resurrected life...because God was willing to spend his Son on us. God was willing to spend his Son, the beloved...on you. Amen.

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