

13th Sunday After Pentecost

August 30, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Gospel: Matthew 16:21-28

²¹ From that time on, [after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah,] Jesus 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. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷ “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. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

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SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

Today’s readings that we just heard are all about divine things versus human things; the will of God versus the human ego.

Our readings began with Jeremiah, who logged a complaint with God about his life being very unhappy. He laments to God that all his enemies have surrounded him and intend to take away his life. He also laments that being God’s prophet has kept him from living a happy life where he can rejoice with friends. Instead his life is full of pain that, in his mind, won’t heal.



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Now, to Jeremiah's credit, being a prophet who has to bring a word of God's judgment to Judah and Israel is one who will not be very popular. We human beings want reassurance and comfort proclaimed to us. We don't want to have to deal with the harsh realities and the unfairness of life because we all have suffered enough as it is! Or because we are currently very happy with our lives and we don't want something to change or disrupt that feeling of happiness. Either way, we human beings have never been very receptive of the harsh truths that point us to the ways sin has controlled us or our society.

But Jeremiah gets too focused on his own life and his own unhappiness that he forgets why God made him a prophet in the first place. He believes that God has turned away from him because of his perceived miserable life.

Thankfully, God responds to Jeremiah with mercy since God loves Jeremiah and stays faithful to the covenant promise. God's response to Jeremiah is to plea for him to reset his mind back to God's will and continue his work as God's prophet. In doing so, God then promises Jeremiah that the people will come to him and listen on the account of sharing God's word. Not only that, but God will also make Jeremiah a "fortified wall of bronze," that will not be destroyed. Yes, God tells Jeremiah that people will still fight him for the truth he brings, which is God's truth; however, God also promises that no one will be able to take Jeremiah's life and that God will deliver him from the wicked ones.

If we were to continue reading through the book of Jeremiah, we would come to understand that Jeremiah did turn his thoughts back to doing God's will and that God's promises did come true. Further on in the book of Jeremiah the message begins to take on the characters of hope and promise, and more people begin to listen to the word of God that Jeremiah brings.

But then we also have Peter. Our gospel story this morning brings about an ironic twist. Last week, Peter and the disciples give an amazing proclamation in declaring that they believe Jesus to be the Messiah and the Son of the living God. This week's reading, however, shows us that Peter and the disciples only understood this proclamation in human terms.

Since making the proclamation, Jesus begins to tell the disciples more details about what it means that he is the messiah and the Son of God. He tells them the harsh truth that he will have to go to Jerusalem in order to be condemned and crucified and raised up on the third



day. The disciples do not take this news very well. Of course, who could blame them? Imagine if you had a dear loved one come to you and tell you that they must undergo great suffering and die. Would any of us take that news well?

Once again, the disciples were too focused on human things, for they didn't want Jesus to die because, firstly, he was supposed to be the messianic, earthly king who would unite Israel and lead its armies to victory over the Romans so that they could have their prosperous nation back. The disciples believed that Jesus would be Israel's king who would bring Israel to a similar time of prosperity that reflected the rule of King David. Secondly, they didn't want Jesus to die because Jesus was their dear beloved friend. None of them wanted to bear the grief of losing their beloved Jesus to death. They wanted a long life with Jesus, not to see him die.

No one wants to let go of their loved one to death. It is easy for us to become selfish in the face of death, for we want to live a long life and we want our loved ones to live a long life. There is a reason we feel robbed when a loved one dies of cancer at a young age, or has their life taken away by a fatal car crash. In those moments (and rightly so!) it can be easy for us to forget God's promise of eternal life and God's promise of salvation from death. After all, living a life on earth is tangible whereas eternal life with God, beyond death, is mysterious and unseen. Plus, when someone goes to be with God for all eternity, we become physically separated. That can be really hard to deal with.

This is often where faith and trust come into play for us. Sometimes, because of our limited human understanding, we cannot help but focus on human things rather than divine things. Peter and the disciple's mistake (although I don't know if I want to use the word mistake, for it is human instinct to want our species to survive for as long as possible, especially our close loved ones) was in the fact that they did not trust in what Jesus was saying; they did not trust that God had a purpose for Jesus' death. They totally missed the fact that Jesus told them that he would rise again after three days of death.

While Jesus' rebuke to Peter sounds harsh, it was more for Jesus' sake than Peter's sake that he said: "Get behind me Satan!" We must remember that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human. This means that while Jesus was fully God, he at the same time was fully human and had our human limitations. Jesus' rebuke was reminding himself not to fall into the



human understanding that one must be selfish and preserve their life for as long as possible, even when it is God's will that he must die in order to bring about salvation.

Now, when Jesus goes on to tell the disciples that they must take up their own crosses in order to continue to follow him, he is not asking them to martyr themselves, even though most of the disciples did end up being martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ. Instead, Jesus was reminding the disciples that, in order to follow Jesus, they must put away their selfish egos and trust in God's will. Just like God reminded Jeremiah to do the same.

And this, of course, is where Paul's reading comes in handy this morning. Paul gives us a "Christian Checklist" so to speak in how we turn away from selfishness in order to follow the will of God. Paul tells his Roman audience, as well as us, that to live as a fellow member of the body of Christ, to live in the age of Christ, means that we must act first and foremost with love. He then expands upon that understanding with further explanation—love one another with mutual affection, which means that we should love all people, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, political party, or social standing. After all, we believe that Jesus died for the entire world; that means everybody!

Paul then continues with other things that we should do as Christians including serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; being patient in suffering; persevering in prayer; being generous to the needy; blessing those who persecute us; rejoice with those rejoicing and weep with those weeping; live in harmony; don't act wiser than you actually are; do not repay evil for evil; do not avenge ourselves; and do not be overcome by evil, but return evil actions with good and loving actions.

It sounds like a lot of things to do; hard things to do, especially blessing those who persecute us, not seeking revenge, and returning evil actions with loving actions. But this is what it means to follow God's will, and it isn't as hard as we may think it is.

After all, because Jesus continued to focus on divine things, he successfully went to the cross, suffered, and died, which transformed the world by taking away the power that sin and death held over us. We are now free to live into God's love and follow God's will, for we belong to God and not to sin. And, because of this, God gives us Jesus to abide with us through the Holy Spirit so that we are never alone in facing the powers of evil and sin. Jesus abiding with us strengthens us to live with love, even when it feels like people are against us.



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Jesus abiding with us gives us the ability to see every person as beloved children of God, which empowers us to act with mercy and compassion. Jesus abiding with us frees us to understand the bigger picture of a world outside of ourselves where community grounded in service and love is indeed possible. Jesus abiding with us helps us to trust that, when we live all aspects of our daily lives grounded in love, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness, we help God transform the world into the kingdom of God.

And how do we know that Jesus abides with us so that we can trust in the divine things rather than the human things? Well, that is why we listen to God's word proclaimed each week, and that is why we receive the blessed sacraments of Holy Communion and baptism. Through these sacraments we are promised that Jesus abides with us. When we were baptized, we were sealed with the Holy Spirit forever, and when we partake in the Eucharistic feast, we literally ingest the Lord of the universe through the bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus.

This is why we worship every week, to be reminded that we have been freed to focus on the divine things in life, for worship reminds us that God has freed us from the powers of sin and death; God has freed us to love and serve all people, so that the good news of Jesus Christ can continue to be spread in our broken world.

Amen.



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