

**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**August 29, 2011**

Matthew 16:21-28 "Get Behind Christ!"

This past week and weekend remind us how powerless we are when it comes to earthquakes and hurricanes and the stock market. We are a people that like to take charge of life around us. We make our own decisions as to where to live, where to work, where to go to school, how much we will save, how much we will spend, when to go to the doctor, whether we will have surgery or not, whether to keep taking our medicine, and where and when we will go to church. We need to feel we are in control and that we have everything under control in our lives. However, when the stock market takes a tumble, or the earth begins to shake under our feet, or the water rises and the winds howl around us, we can feel very small, frightened or helpless. At such times we discover that the life we usually have under our control is suddenly outside of our control.

In Matthew 16, Peter shows us that he has the same tendency that we have. He wants to take charge of the situation and come out victorious, and he wants that for Christ, too. Having personally witnessed many of Jesus' miracles, including the healing of his own mother-in-law, Peter gives a beautiful confession of who Christ is: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." That was the easy part for him. However, when Christ begins to speak about his own suffering and death to which he must submit, Peter says, "No way. This will never happen to you!" Peter is ready to do anything possible so that this does not happen to the Christ. He has his own idea about what success will look like for his teacher. He can take control of this situation so that Christ will be successful without the cross.

Peter shows us how easily or naturally it can be to embrace Christ and call ourselves Christians, but then how quickly it is to fall when we are not firmly grounded in Christ. Jesus teaches us that we can never embrace him as our Savior and call ourselves Christians without the cross of Christ. That's what Peter sought to do. He wanted the glory without the cross. He loved Jesus, but he did not want to have anything to do with the cross. Eventually, Peter would learn to embrace the cross along with faith in Christ, and so we must, also.

You are here today because the Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel to embrace Jesus Christ as your Savior. You thought it was you that brought you here, but it is Christ who brought you after years of invitations, years of reminders, and years of receiving communion. Of course, some of you are here because your parents made you come because they know that this is where you and they must be. We gather weekly at God's invitation to remember Jesus' death at Jerusalem. We remember how he suffered at the hands of his enemies when he was whipped and crucified. We remember that it was God's plan that Jesus would become a sacrifice for our sins at the cross. Jesus took all our sins of thought, word, and deed upon himself at the cross, and he became sin. He bore God's wrath for us.

And now that we have begun communion at every service, that sacrament reminds us what is also very real when we gather around God's Word – "We proclaim Christ's death until he comes again."

Jesus told his disciples:

*"... that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."*

Christ rose again from the dead three days later on Easter, and we celebrate every Sunday a “little Easter” in honor of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Jesus was victorious for us over our sins, death and the grave. These things do not have any power over us. We have embraced Christ in saving faith. We are entirely victorious. Therefore, God invites us every Sunday to celebrate his resurrection victory which he won for us. We respond by calling ourselves Christians and placing our trust in Christ.

However, our sinful nature still struggles within us. We want to be like Peter and confess that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” but also like Peter, we want to leave the cross behind. Yes, Christ’s death on the cross was necessary for our sins, but that was in the past. Therefore, we’re not looking for any crosses in our future. However, that is why we sometimes hide our witness from others because we do not want to be judged or criticized, and thus carry the cross. We want to protect ourselves. We want Jesus, but we don’t want the suffering that can come with our witness of him.

I think one of the reasons that we stumble when it comes to carrying the cross is that we are looking for acceptance or approval from other people in the world who do not have the same allegiance to Christ and the cross that we have. It makes sense to me that we would seek rather to nurture friendships with other Christians at church and encourage each other in our common witness. Then we would be less concerned about pleasing the world and more focused on pleasing our Savior.

Peter was looking for a victorious Messiah without the cross. He wanted a popular Jesus. He wanted a victorious Jesus. He wanted the Jesus without the cross. We sometimes want the same.

Jesus says to us at such times, “Get behind me, Satan.” Satan was a powerful angel in heaven, but he rejected God by seeking greatness for himself. God cast him out of heaven, and he has opposed God ever since. The devil has worked hard to attack God’s creation, and he led Adam and Eve into the first sin. The devil fought against God’s plan of a Savior for us in Jesus by trying to tempt Jesus into rejecting God’s plan to save us. So when Peter said, “No way,” he was stepping in the devil’s shoes. When Christians reject the cross, they may seem to be rejecting Christ who carried a cross for our sins, but the cross is the very means by which our forgiveness and restoration with God is accomplished. We dare not deny our very means of salvation. Rather, we find rest and restoration in Christ by getting ourselves behind Christ and the cross.

The cross of Christ is a very real part of the Christian’s life. God daily and richly forgives us our sins and doubts, helps us in our struggles, and restores us in faithfulness through the cross. While a person can certainly live without Christ and the cross, he or she cannot have a completely fulfilling life without Christ and the cross. We can seek all the comforts of home for ourselves, but when the winds blow or the earth shakes, and what we have is no longer there, what is left for us? However, the Christian is left with the message of Christ.

We must daily deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ. We can live as authentic Christians by carrying the message of Christ in our hearts, in our lives, and on our lips. The forgiveness of our sins empowers us to be Christ to a world that struggles with doubts, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, the forces of nature, and the forces of Satan. The cross of Christ will never let us down!

Therefore, recommit yourselves daily and weekly to growth in Christ in preparation for our gathering with Christ in heaven. The time we spend with God’s Word grounds us in Christ. It makes our faith stronger. It gives us the words for our witness. It gives us the words to encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ. It gives us the words to lead another person to know our Savior. It puts us in

communion with those who have gone before and are in heaven waiting for us to join them. It puts us in communion with the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, who we will see with our eyes in this life or the life to come when he returns to take home the church. How coincidental that one of the signs of Christ's return is earthquakes in various places, and we experienced one in our lifetime in this area in just the past week. When we seek growth from God's Word, then we become stronger to carry the cross of Christ, just like those who have gone before us in the Christian faith.

Without the cross of Jesus Christ, we would still be in our sins and separated from God. Therefore, since we have embraced Jesus Christ as our Savior, we must also embrace his cross as our own. That is, we must be ready to deny ourselves and anything that gets in the way of 100% allegiance to Christ and the Gospel. Therefore, being a Christian is a lifelong process of submitting our own ideas of being a Christian when they clash with Christ and the cross. Then at the end of our lives, we have the promise of an open door to heaven and eternal life with our Savior.

*solī deo gloria*