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Matthew 16:21-28 – *The Life of Peter: Behind Christ*

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Discipleship is a process of growing:

Growing in love for God and others.

Where we've been looking at the disciples:

The invitation, "Come and see."

"Come and learn more."

"Grow in me. See more of what I'm about."

Learning that following Christ does not mean disciples avoid the storms...

Rather that Christ is with them in the storm.

This week the disciples continue to learn Christ.

They continue to learn what he is all about...

And how following him will upend their way of life.

Matthew 16:21-28

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

²⁸ "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

We've all seen it before...

A momma duck leading her little ducklings.

Taking them across the path for a walk in the grass...

Maybe leading them away from the dangers of curious toddlers...

Or guiding them close to shore on the waters of the pond.

Momma duck in front...

And a line of ducklings following...following.

It would be a little strange to see momma duck tucked somewhere in the back of the line...

Behind the ducklings...

Allowing *them* to lead the way.

In our passage this morning, we have a situation:

One of the ducklings swims to the front of the line and tries to tell mom where to go...

They try to be helpful by giving mom some direction.

Peter hears Jesus predict his own suffering and death...

So he swims up to the front of the line...

Pulls Jesus aside...

And tells Jesus he's not going in the right direction:

"Suffering!? Death!? Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" (16:22)

Peter is balking at suffering—

The suffering of the Christ...

And potentially his own suffering.

Peter's and the other disciples' expectations of the Messiah were grand:

The Messiah would come in strength and power;

The Messiah would set Israel free from her Roman enemies;

The Messiah would rule as king with a mighty hand...

Suffering and death had no place.

Suffering and death would spell *defeat* for the Messiah...

And Peter couldn't let this happen.

Not only that...

If Peter and the disciples are following Jesus—

This man who is to suffer and be killed—

It probably will not fare well for them either.

Peter balks at Jesus' prediction of suffering and death.

They have no place in the life of God's Messiah...

Surely this is *not* the way to the top.

So, Peter jumps the line...

And offers his own pastoral wisdom to Jesus.

And Jesus responds with a strong rebuke of his own:

"Get behind me, Satan!"

"You are a stumbling block!"

"You are being controlled by human desires!"

We're meant to recall Jesus' time in the wilderness earlier in Matthew...

Where Satan takes Jesus up a high mountain...

Shows him the kingdoms of the world and promises:

"All of this will be yours if you worship me."

"Away from me, Satan!" Jesus replies.

Satan offered Jesus an easier way of getting to the top—

A way that avoided suffering and death—

And now Peter is essentially doing the same thing...

Trying to counsel Jesus away from suffering and death:

“Surely there’s a different way,” Peter implies.

And Jesus says, “Get behind me.”

“The place of the disciple is to follow.”

“The place of the disciple is to go where the Master goes.”

“Disciples follow their teacher, not lead them.”

“Get back in line, Peter.”

The question that we’re ask to wrestle with this morning is:

“As Christ’s disciple, am I following Christ, or am I trying to lead?”

How often do we swim to the front of the line?

When something isn’t going the way that *we* think it should go...

How often do we try to counsel God?

We’re at a place in our discipleship where we believe in Jesus—

That he is who he says he is...

That he is the Messiah and Son of God—

We believe that he has done what he said he has done...

That he comes to save his people.

We’ve spent time with him and we’ve grown in our relationship with him—

Just like Peter and the other disciples—

But then something comes our way in life that doesn’t seem right...

It’s not what we’ve expected.

“Uhhh, Lord? I think you’re going the wrong way.”

“Let me help you out a little here.”

And so we try to wrestle control from God.

Instead of *following* Jesus, we try to *lead*.

Most often this happens when life gets uncomfortable...

When pain (emotional or physical) and suffering are involved.

Something happens in life that impacts us financially—

Maybe we lose our job...

Or see others around us making more money...

Maybe we know we're worth more than we're paid and it's eating us up...

We're questioning a dishonest means of making money.

Maybe something happens that impacts us physically—

We get sick/injured or a loved-one gets sick..

Even after years of careful attention to our health.

Maybe something happens that impacts us emotionally or spiritually—

Maybe we're asked to confront something from our past...

Somewhere that we've hurt someone or been hurt.

Or maybe something has been going on for some time...

We've remained faithful so far, but we're growing weary.

So, we peer our head around those in front of us...

Looking ahead at the leader.

We think that maybe God is taking us in the wrong direction.

Things are getting too uncomfortable around us—

We sense pain and suffering getting too close—

So we try to take things into our own hands...

We swim to the front to take the lead.

We do everything we can in order to escape the pain and discomfort.

We are *called* to follow...

But we *prefer* to lead when things get tough.

Jesus is offered the easy way...

The way free of pain.

Satan tells him the kingdoms of the world will be his...

All Jesus has to do is bow down.

Peter tries to steer him away from taking a path of pain and suffering...

“You’re the Messiah...”

“*You*, of all people, don’t have to suffer.”

“This shall never happen to *you*.” (16:22)

Jesus is offered the pain-free path...

But he chooses to walk the way of suffering.

He does not walk in the way of self-interest.

Why?

Because it was necessary.

“I *must* go to Jerusalem and suffer...” (16:21)

“It is *necessary* for me to suffer...and be killed.”

Christ’s suffering is necessary for Life.

If God wants Life for his people...

The Messiah *must* suffer.

Jesus Christ *must* take their pain.

In your NIV Bible you’ll see that this section is sub-titled:

“Jesus Predicts His Death.”

This is the first of three occasions where Jesus predicts his death...

So, we don’t get the full interpretation of it yet.

But, shortly after the third prediction Jesus says:

“The Son of Man comes to give *his life* as a ransom for many.” (20:28)

And at the Last Supper, words that we’ll hear soon, he says:

“This is *my* blood poured out *for many*, for the forgiveness of sins.” (26:28)

There is a substitutionary element to his suffering and death...

Where Jesus takes the place of his people.

Jesus knew what had to happen.

He knew that it was *necessary* for him to suffer.

“I *must* go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed.”

Jesus understood that he would be fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant:

“Taking up *our* pain...and bearing *our* suffering.”

“Being punished for the transgressions of God’s people.” (Isa 53:4-5)

Taking the wrath and punishment from God upon himself.

Without his death...

Our sins are still held against us.

There is no restored relationship with God...

There is no eternal salvation...

There is no Life...

Without the suffering and death of the Messiah.

Jesus kept in line with the will that was set before all time—

Decided upon in the eternal council of the Trinity—

That the Son would give his life for the people.

There was an easier way for Jesus...

But thanks be to God he followed the will of the Father...

Because that easier way didn’t lead to Life for God’s people.

Jesus did not balk at suffering...

He walked into it and gave us Life.

And now, we’re invited into this Life.

We’re invited into this Life won for us by Jesus Christ—

Where our sins are forgiven;

Our relationship with our Maker is restored;

Eternal life after death is guaranteed;

And the Spirit now, empowers us daily to be conformed into Christ’s image—

We’re invited into this Life...

But it doesn't come as we'd expect it.

It doesn't come by striving for the things of this world/living the "good life":

More money, more vacation time, better sex life, early retirement, more recognition, better-behaved children, or more self-awareness.

Jesus is clear that Life comes to those who follow him:

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." (Matt 16:24)

"If you want Life, you must give yourself up to me."

We are invited into Life by God...

But it only comes by taking ourselves out of the center...

By falling back in line—

Behind Christ—

Allowing him to lead.

These three phrases—

"Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me"—

All get at the same idea:

Loyalty to Christ above myself.

Commitment to Christ over my own interests.

Following Christ wherever he leads.

And if he goes the way of suffering in this life...

We too can expect to go the same way.

For Jesus' disciples, "taking up your cross" literally meant death.

There was nothing glamorous about the cross for them...

It was a tool used for public execution.

Taking up our cross probably won't mean death in the same way...

But it will mean death of our self-interest.

It will mean a daily reorientation from self-interest to God-interest...

Where God is at the center of all we think, say, feel, and do.

It might mean doing those things we'd rather not do:

Like helping one of the kids with homework...

Or playing with them...

When we'd rather just check out after a long day.

It might mean teaching our kids to pray...

Even though praying out loud is very uncomfortable for us...

Even in front of our children.

It might mean staying committed to your family or spouse...

When you'd rather try out something else.

It might mean turning down a business opportunity that isn't ethical...

Or turning down a promotion we know isn't right for us as we follow Christ.

It might mean taking the actions of love...

Toward someone we've been loving to hate.

It might mean taking a hard look at a long-standing habit—

An unhealthy habit—

And taking steps to be rid of it.

Not because we want to do any of this...

But because we're being called to follow Christ...

Away from self-interest.

We situate ourselves behind Christ...

We daily re-orient our lives to Christ...

Not because he's a good moral teacher...

Not because we want to live a noble life...

But because Jesus walked the way of suffering.

The Son of God willingly gave up his life for us...

So that we could have Life.

And now we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him...

Because he has secured Life and is leading us in the way.

May the Holy Spirit fill us with the power to follow behind Christ...

For God's glory.

Amen.