

Matt. 16:21-28 14th Sunday after Pentecost September 1, 1996

21From that time on, 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. 22And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23But 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."

24Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For 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. 28Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Every so often people come by here and they tell me this is the most wonderful church they have ever been a part of. They can't say enough good things at first.

For at first they are new, the center of other's concern. People listen as they tell where they have been, what they have done. They have been put up on a pedestal and honored. But slowly things change.

After a time there are others, newer still. And the ones who thought this was the greatest church now must become part of the greeters instead of the greeted. And sometimes they just don't make the transition from everyone is interested in me, to I need to be interested in others.

Jesus loves you. Jesus loves you more than his own life, Jesus gave his life for you.

Whenever the gospel is spoken to you you are put in the very center of God's concern. The almighty God honors you and puts you on the pedestal in Jesus Christ. The Lord of all becomes your servant, washes your feet, takes his cup and gives it to you, his bread and breaks it for you.

The Lord, the creator of all, honors and exalts you.

And then says to you, "Love one another as I have loved you. In the same way that I have loved you, love one another. If I your Lord and teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Just as soon as we know we are up there on that pedestal, honored by God, Jesus invites us to crawl down and put our lowliest sister or brother there, and honor her or him.

Now you are the servant, honoring those who merit no honor, washing their feet as it were, taking your bread and giving it so they might feast, your cup that their thirst might be satisfied.

But do you know the truth about me? I want to stay on the pedestal. I not only want Jesus to give his life for me, but you as well - every one of you. But if I get my way, Jesus says I will lose my life, my self, my soul.

“Those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Jesus says to you and to me, "If any what to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

What does this mean? Treating my neighbor in the very same way Jesus has treated me.

The one greeted so warmly, now forgets herself and greets others with the same greeting she has received.

The one forgiven now becomes the forgiver.

The one served by Jesus, now becomes the server.

Listen to Paul's words to we who have been honored by Jesus giving his life for us. I read from God's Word to the Nations:

“Be devoted to each other like a loving family. Excel in showing respect for each other. Share what you have with God's people who are in need. Be hospitable.”

Now that doesn't sound so hard, why we might actually feel like loving those who are part of a loving family.

But listen to these words: “Bless those who persecute you. Bless them and don't curse them. Don't pay people back evil for the evil they do to you. Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil with good.”

Sometimes the way we talk it sounds as if once you believe in Jesus that you will naturally want to be like him. And love and forgive. Naturally.

Well, if love and forgiveness ever came naturally then this would be a far different world. Revenge comes naturally, getting even, making sure they get what they deserve – that comes naturally..

But if you would come after Jesus then you will need to deny yourself, say no to yourself, take up your cross, and follow.

Because love and forgiveness do not come naturally Jesus calls you to deny yourself.

And take up your cross

What is this cross? Blessing those who persecute you, not paying back evil for evil, sharing with God's people who are in need, welcoming strangers. Not letting evil poison your heart and conquer you but conquering evil with good.

How tough is this? Impossible. I can't try hard enough. I'll never make it. The "me" that wants to be on the pedestal wants none of this. What can I do?

Die. In repentance die, lose my life and all my dreams of making the world and God and all of you fall down at my feet. I must die, be put on the cross with Jesus. That is just what God did to you in your baptism. And to me in mine. We died with Christ. That God might raise up a new creation. Not me, but Christ in me.

Paul says it this way: "So it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me."

Christ in you washing feet, sharing Bread, offering the cup.

"So if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new."

You are God's new creation in Christ. Thanks be to God!

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