

## ***FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST***

*Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28*

Last Sunday's Gospel was really fun, Peter's answering for the disciples that Jesus is much more than people were saying he was, that he was the Messiah. Fun because Jesus affirmed them and even told Peter he was a rock on which he would build the church. Fun for us, because we can hear that story and also feel affirmed as part of that church that exists as the very body of Christ.

Today, though, it's not so fun. Today we hear Jesus telling Peter and the disciples the sacrificial cost of what he must do to carry out God's will for all people, and the sacrificial cost of what they must do as the body of Christ.

Jesus said, "You are right in saying I am the Messiah, but since I am, I must go up to Jerusalem where I will suffer much and be rejected by the religious leaders. There I will be killed, and after three days rise again."

Typically, Peter took the initiative again, speaking for the disciples: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

In a sense Peter is boasting, "We will protect you. We will see that you are accepted and not rejected. We will never let you die." Peter did not want for his leader to experience pain, unpleasantness, suffering, rejection, death. This did not fit the disciples' idea of what it meant for their leader to be the Messiah.

Hearing this, Jesus became so angry that he took Peter to task

and said to him, “Get behind me Satan!” Frustrated, Jesus was saying, “Peter, once more you do not understand what is going on. You are the one I am most counting on to provide leadership when I am gone. I need for you, above all, to understand, and you still don't know what God truly intends for his Christ and for you.”

Though Peter replied, “Oh, no, Lord, not you,” perhaps he was also saying, “Oh, no, Lord, not me!” It is easy for us to imagine that Peter knew that Jesus’ rebuke meant the same thing for himself and that he did not want to experience pain, unpleasantness, rejection, suffering, death.

We can imagine that it was natural for Peter to feel this way because we also tend to say “Oh, no, Lord, not me!” We do not want to experience pain, unpleasantness, rejection, suffering, death.

Wouldn’t we rather forget what Jesus had to go through?

Wouldn’t we rather remember Christmas and Easter and forget Ash Wednesday and Good Friday? Wouldn’t we rather focus only on the pleasant side of the story?

With God, though, it had to be the other way. For through his life, suffering, death on the cross, and resurrection, Jesus saves us by showing us the way to a life of God’s forgiveness, love, and grace, given with no conditions, no strings attached. God provides for us the chance to live a life with a full range of the possibilities potentially present in everyone.

Jesus saves us by his death, by overcoming once and for all the power of sin. Sin no longer can have a death grip over us because Christ makes it clear that God will forgive the sin that we confess and from which we repent in the sincere desire to renew our lives. And because Christ makes us realize that we are the most precious in creation, even worth dying for.

Christ's death and resurrection give us the hope and purpose to go on in life despite the difficulties or tragedies that may befall us. Jesus laid this out to Peter in telling him, "Let me do what I must do." He did this by calling all his followers together to tell them once more in the clearest possible terms what was at stake for the world and what he was calling them to do. To truly follow him, they had to follow him all the way to Jerusalem.

They had to deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow him.

This is Christ's call to us, as well. To deny ourselves is to put aside thoughts of our own needs, forgetting ourselves, so that we may remember and care for others. Taking up our crosses is to be ready to endure the worst that may happen to us for being true to God and the values of God.

The Good News of today's Gospel is that being a Christian is not always easy, but it is always life-giving and meaningful.

The Good News of today's Gospel is that we have the resources to give up or take on whatever we must for the sake of God. We can make the necessary sacrifices, the offering and giving of ourselves so that God's work may be done.

The Good News of today's Gospel is that we have the resources to take up our own crosses. We can give ourselves away, not hoarding our resources, knowing that God gave us life not to keep it, but to spend for the sake of God and His children. We can take up our crosses to follow Jesus by giving our time, our talents, and our treasure for God's uses.

The Good News of today's Gospel is being truly faithful to traveling our own hills of Calvary, following Jesus' steps, doing our utmost to live in his example, striving everyday to do what he would do in our particular situation.

The Good News of today's Gospel is also what Jesus tells us

about the result of all this. He asks us to consider the reality that “those who want to save their life will lose it.” What good is there in having worldly riches but lose spiritual life? Jesus adds, “Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

It does not get much clearer than that. We may sacrifice honor and honesty for profit and self. We may sacrifice principle and Christian values for popularity. We may sacrifice the values of God for the riches of the world. We may do all these things, but today Jesus makes us consider what we would gain by such behavior. By His example, Jesus makes it clear that all we will gain is a self-imposed separation from God and God’s realm, that is, unless we seek to be one with Christ, deny our selfishness and bear the crosses God calls us to bear, follow Jesus on his journey, surrounded by God, and join the faithful members of the body of Christ in heeding the Good News that is today’s Gospel.

**AMEN.**