

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 30, 2020

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Death Is Required

Matthew 16:21–28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

The Word of God is the Gospel reading, especially the passion prediction in which **“Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things . . . , and be killed, and on the third day be raised”** (Mt 16:21).

Do you remember the “little question” Jesus put to the disciples last week? Jesus asked, **“Who do you say that I am?”** (Mt 16:15). Taught by the Holy Spirit from the Word of God, we confess with St. Peter: **“You, Jesus, are the Christ, the Son of the living God”** (Mt 16:16). Of all the opinions and ideas out there about Jesus, this is the only true confession. This man Jesus of Nazareth is also God’s Son. Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s Old Testament promises, and He is the hope of God’s people Israel.

You were baptized into this confession. You made this confession publicly at your confirmation. You confess it again each Sunday in the Creed. The point isn’t just that we shape these words with our mouths and say it. What matters is that this confession and these words shape us. They shape us week after week and day after day. So what does it mean to say **“Jesus is the Christ”**? Do you know what it means for Jesus? Do you know what it means for you?

I’ll tell you:

IT MEANS SUFFERING; IT MEANS CRUCIFIXION;
IT MEANS DEATH; AND IT MEANS RESURRECTION.

I.

From that time on Jesus began to show 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 (Mt 16:21).

For Jesus to be the Christ, death is required. To do the work of His office, to fulfill His baptism, to be God’s beloved Son, He cannot remain alive. The Christ must die. “Must” is a really strong word. It’s our Lord’s word. It underscores the necessity of what Jesus would do:

He must go to Jerusalem;

He must **suffer many things**;
He must **be killed**;
and on the third day He must be raised (Mt 16:21).

This is what He tells the disciples. Losing His life, giving Himself up, shedding His blood isn't optional or "maybe" or one possibility among many. It can't be any other way. Love for sinners comes in the shape of a cross, a brutal, painful cross. Love for sinners receives death as **the wages of sin** (Rom 6:23). So to call Jesus the Christ is to name Him as our sin bearer. It is to give Him a death sentence. It is to beg for His crucifixion.

This is the beauty, the glory, the triumph of Christ: His bloody death on the cross for you; Jesus giving His life to save, deliver, and redeem your life.

II.

Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a hindrance to Me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Mt 16:22–23).

Peter didn't want Jesus to do it. He didn't want Jesus to go to Jerusalem, to suffer, or to die. This is going to sound strange, but aren't we the same way? Given the choice, would we have prevented Jesus from doing this? There are plenty of times that I've wished Jesus wouldn't have had to die. Do we want Jesus victorious but not dead? In glory but not crucified? That's what Peter wanted. He wanted a cross-less Christ. Peter wanted to save this life, which means Peter wanted to remain under the curse. That's what He was asking. Peter wanted to avoid all fleshly pain and death. To think like he does here is to minimize sin. It's to act as if sin is no big deal, not really that bad—certainly not as serious as death and hell. Not my sin! Not yours! To say this is to act as if I could survive, as if I could make it, without our Lord and His bloody cross. Peter implies that the death of Jesus wasn't really necessary "for us and for our salvation" (*Nicene Creed*). But don't stop there. Follow this thought another step. Doesn't this way of thinking also make the Church and the sacraments optional, unnecessary? If Jesus didn't need to die, then I don't really need His forgiveness. Then I could do without the preaching of Christ crucified. I could do without the new birth of baptism. I could do without God's absolution. I could survive without the body and blood of Jesus Christ placed into my mouth. Do you see now why Jesus calls this satanic, a hindrance to Him? It would keep Him from the very work He comes to do and from delivering everything He did to you.

Peter's words and our thinking aren't really about protecting Jesus. They're about saving and sparing ourselves. They're about protecting us from Jesus, keeping us away

from the cross, because we don't want what that cross brings. Our sinful nature doesn't want to give up our sin; that's why we don't want Him to die. Yes, we want to have a part in His kingdom, but just as we are. We don't want to give anything up. We want to live under Him without being exposed, crucified, put to death. Our desire for a crossless Christ is what leads us Christians to expect glory and success here. It's what makes us surprised by the suffering and death we experience. It's what leads us to complain when trials and struggles come. "By all means give me Christ," we say, "but please leave out the cross." My sinful nature doesn't want the cross or any part of it.

III.

Then Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save His life will lose it, but whoever loses His life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?" (Mt 16:24–26).

For Jesus to be my Lord the Christ and for me to be a Christian, death is required. His death most certainly, for His death atones for our sin and saves. But I must also be joined to His death and die with Him. That's how Jesus speaks to the disciples. The weight of the cross must fall on them and crucify them. If we would be Christians, our path will go through the cross. There's no other way. The Christian must die. The Christian must lose His life for Christ's sake; deny himself rather than deny Christ. To be under the cross means that you cannot be your own master, your own Lord and ruler. You don't get to control your body and life. You aren't free to do as you please. You may not continue in sin. Jesus our Lord would rip the sin out of us, nail our flesh to His cross, and put our sinful nature to death. Being a Christian isn't painless and easy. At times it's terribly painful and deadly, but God. If you've ever been hit over the head with your sin, you know what I mean. He kills us so that He might make us alive. He puts our sinful nature to death, in order to set us free from sin, entirely new and reborn in Him.

The shape of Christ's life is the shape of your life as well: You are formed by the cross. St. Paul reminds us of this in Romans, chapter 6: **"Don't you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life"** (Rom 6:3–4). Again He says: **"You also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus"** (Rom 6:11). And in Galatians, chapter 2, He writes: **"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"** (Gal 2:20). The cross comes to us in baptism.

So we take up the cross, but where are we taking it to? Where's the place I must go to die? Jesus headed to Jerusalem, but the putting to death of my sinful nature takes place each day at home, at work, at church, at school, wherever I happen to be. Love for my neighbor comes in the shape of a cross, like Christ's love for me. When I hear these words, I think of my life: I lose my life by serving my wife and my children, by caring for the members of my church, by visiting the sick and shut in. This is where I'm called to give myself up again each day. That's where I'm called to lay down my life. What about you? Think about your life today, tomorrow, the rest of this week: Where will you be? Who will you be with? For whom will you lay down your life? That's where you take up your cross and follow Jesus. That's where you die to yourself that you might live for your neighbor. It also means that no marriage, no family, no home, no school, no church or community or workplace will be filled with glory here. They all have their crosses. So to call Jesus the Christ is give yourself a death sentence, to beg for your own crucifixion.

IV.

Then Jesus says, **“For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of the Father, and then He will repay each person according to what He has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom”** (Mt 16:27–28).

Jesus has truly gone to His cross. He really took your sin on Himself. He really was laid in your grave. He really suffered hell for you. And He really rose from the dead on the third day. We can take up our crosses because of Christ's sacrifice for us. We can take up our crosses because He has forgiven all our sins. We can take our crosses because we live with Him through baptism. We can take up our crosses because we are strengthened by His body and blood. In Him, we take up the cross to suffer and die as Christians. No matter how much we give up or lay down for others, we have nothing to lose. The Son of Man will come in His glory and you, too, will be glorified. Everything worthwhile and valuable in this life, though lost for Christ's sake, will be restored to you in the life to come. Even now you have a taste of His kingdom. No matter how badly your body's been crucified, no matter how heavy the cross that you bear, He will raise it on the last day, the cross will finally be lifted, and He will give you eternal life. Sin and death will be no more. We will live with Him in glory in the endless world to come. First the cross, then the glory, with Jesus.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7